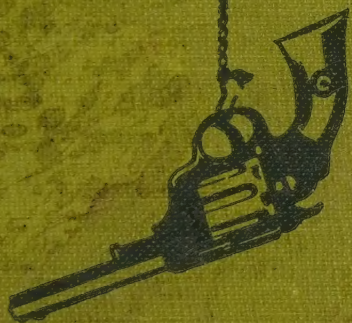
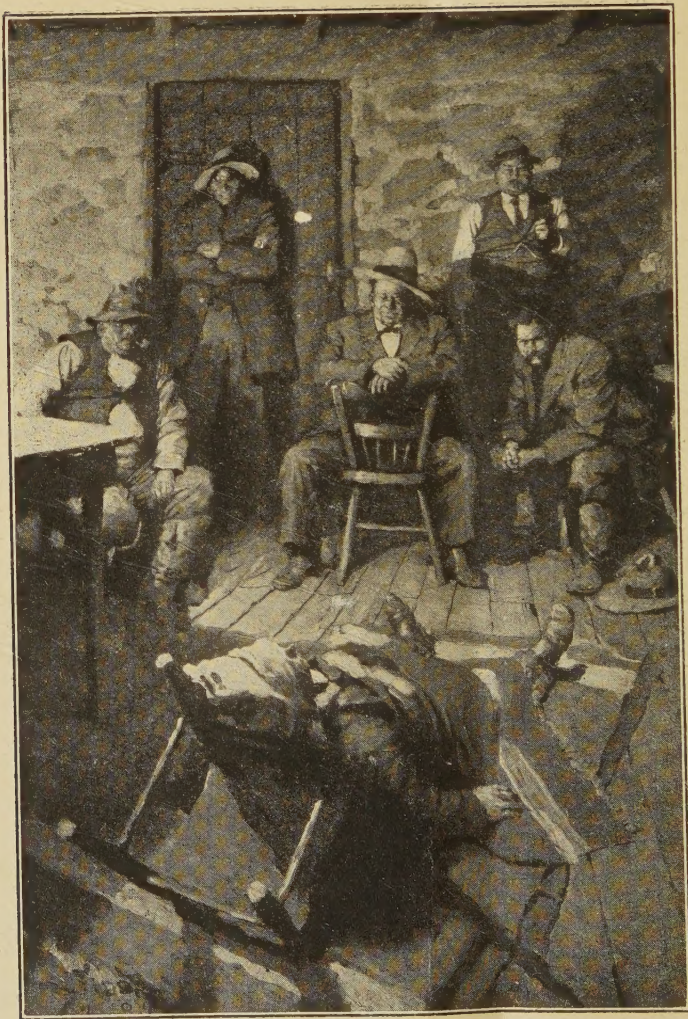


GOOD MEN AND TRUE



EUGENE MANLOVE RHODES



“AND HOW ARE WE NOW, MY YOUNG FRIEND?”—Page 39.

**GOOD MEN AND
TRUE
AND
HIT THE LINE HARD**

**BY
EUGENE MANLOVE RHODES**

**AUTHOR OF
BRANSFORD OF RAINBOW RANGE,
THE DESIRE OF THE MOTH,
WEST IS WEST, Etc.**

**ILLUSTRATIONS BY
H. T. DUNN**



**NEW YORK
GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS**

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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THEY PULLED HIM DOWN, FIGHTING SAVAGELY	. 166



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“In the first place, take the typical cowboy. There positively ain’t no sich person! Maybe so half of ’em’s from Texas and the other half from anywhere and everywhere else. But they’re all alike in just one thing—and that is that every last one of them is entirely different from all the others. Each one talks as he pleases, acts as he pleases and—when not at work—dresses as he pleases. On the range though, they all dress pretty much alike.—Because, the things they wear there have been tried out and they’ve kept only the best of each kind—the best for that particular kind of work.”

“They ‘proved all things and held fast that which was good,’ ” suggested Aughinbaugh.

“Exactly. For instance, that handkerchief business. That isn’t meant as a substitute for a necktie. Ever see a drought? If you did, you probably remember that it was

some dusty. Well—there's been a steady drought out here for two hundred and eight million years come August. And when you drive two, three thousand head of cattle, with four feet apiece, to the round-up ground and chouse 'em 'round half a day, cutting out steers, the dust is so thick a horse can't fall down when he stumbles. Then mister cowboy folds his little hankie, like them other triangles that the ladies, God bless 'em, with their usual perversity, call 'squares,' ties the ends, puts the knot at the back of his neck, pulls the wide part *over* his mouth and up over the bridge of his nose, *and breathes through it!* Got that? By heavens, it's a filter to keep the dust out of your lungs, and not an ornament! It's usually silk—not because silk is booful but because it's better to breathe through."

"Really, I never dreamed——" began Aughinbaugh. But Jeff waved him down.

"Don't speak to the man at the wheel, my son. And everything a cowboy uses, at work, from hat to boots, from saddle to bed, has just as good a reason for being exactly what it is as that handkerchief. Take the high-heeled boots, now——"

"Dad," said Aughinbaugh firmly. "I am faint. Break it to me easy. I was once an interior decorator of some promise, though not a professional. Let me lead you to a restaurant and show you a sample of my skill. Then come round to my rooms and tell me your troubles at leisure. Maybe you'll feel better. But before you explain your wardrobe I want to know why you don't say 'You all' and 'that-a-way,' 'plumb' and 'done gone,' and the rest of it."

"I do, my dear, when I want to," said Bransford affectionately. "Them's all useful words, easy and comfortable, like old clothes

and old shoes. I like 'em. But they go with the old clothes. And now, as you see, I am—to use the metropolitan idiom—in my 'glad rags' and my speech naturally rises in dignity to meet the occasion. Besides, associating with Beebe—he's one of them siss—boom—ah! boys—has mitigated me a heap. Then I read the signs, and the brands on the freight cars. And I'll tell you one more thing, my son. A large proportion—I mean, of course, a right smart chance—of the cowboys are illiterate, and some of them are grand rascals, but they ain't none of 'em plumb imbeciles. They couldn't stay on the job. If their brains don't naturally work pretty spry, things happen to 'em—the chuck-wagon bunts 'em or something. And they all have a chance at 'the education of a gentleman'—'to ride, to shoot and to speak the truth.' They have to ride and shoot—and speakin' the truth comes easier for them than for some

folks, 'cause if speaking the aforesaid truth displeases any one they mostly don't give a damn."

"Stop! Spare me!" cried Aughinbaugh. He collapsed in his chair, sliding together in an attitude of extreme dejection. "My spirits are very low, but——" He rose, tottered feebly to his desk and took therefrom a small bottle, which, with a glass, he handed to Bransford.

"Thanks. But you—you're a tee-to-taler?" said Jeff.

"A—well—not exactly," stammered Aughinbaugh. "But I have to be very careful. I—I only take one drink at a time!" He fumbled out another glass.

"I stumble, I stumble!" said Bransford gravely. He poured out a small drink and passed the bottle. "'I fill this cup to one made up!'"—He held the glass up to the light.

“Well?” said Aughinbaugh, expectantly.

“Go on!”

“That description can’t be bettered,” said Bransford.

“Never will I drink such a toast as that,” cried Aughinbaugh, laughing. “Let me substitute, Here’s to our better acquaintance!”

Chapter II

“Life is just one damn thing after another.”

—*A Nameless Philosopher.*

AUGHINBAUGH closed the door behind him and paused, vastly diverted. His entrance had passed unnoted, muffled by the jerky click-click of the typewriter on which Jeff Bransford toiled with painful absorption. On Jeff's forehead little beads of sweat stood out, glistening in the lamp-light. He scanned the last line, scowled ferociously, and snapped the platen back. His uncertain fingers twitched solicitously above the keys. Aughinbaugh chuckled offensively.

“‘Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look;

He thinks too much: such men are dangerous.’”

he declaimed.

Jeff whirled around. “Hello, here you

are! Any news from our employer?" He rose with a sigh of relief and mopped his brow. "Gee! I've got to work the Jim-fidgets out of my fingers."

Ignoring the query, Aughinbaugh took a step forward, drew up his slender frame, inflated his chest, spread one hand upon it, and threw up his other hand with a flourish of limber fingers. "'Now is the time,'" he spouted forth at Bransford, mouthing the well-known words, "'for all good men and true to come to the aid of the party!'"

Jeff grinned sheepishly. "I'll dream that cussed thing to-night. How long did it take you to learn to play a tune on this fool contraption, anyhow?"

"It took me three months—to play on it anyhow. But then I already knew how to spell. I've been at it two years since and am still improving. I should estimate that you would need about eight years. Better give

it up. Try a maul or a piledriver. More suited to your capabilities. Why, Jeff, a really good stenographer can do first-class work in the dark."

"Eight years? George, you're an optimist. I've worked two solid hours on this one 'simple little sentence,' as you call it, and I've never got it right once. Sometimes I've come within one letter of it. Once I made a mighty effort and got all the letters right, but I forgot to space and ran the words together. And say—that simple little sentence hasn't got near all the letters in it. B, j, k, q, v, x and z are left out."

"Here, then—here's one that contains every letter: 'A quick move by the enemy will jeopardize six fine gunboats.'"

Jeff pulled pad and pencil to him. "Give me that again and I'll take it down." Repeating the alphabet slowly, he canceled each letter as he went. "Right you are! Say, the

fellow that got that up was on the job, wasn't he? Why didn't you give me this one in the first place? Wonder if it's possible to get 'em all in another sentence as short?"

"I think not," said Aughinbaugh. "It's been tried. But I don't share your admiration for the last one. Besides reeking of militarism abhorrent to my peaceful disposition, it is stiff, labored, artificial and insincere. Compare it with the spontaneity, the beauty, the stately cadences, the sonorous fire, the sweep and swing of the simple, natural appeal: '*Now* is the time for all good men and true to come to the aid of the party!'"

If it has ever been your privilege to observe a wise old she-bear watching her cubs at play and to note the expression of her face—half patience, tolerance, resignation; the remainder pride and approval—you will know exactly how Jeff looked. As for Aughin-

baugh, he bore himself grandly, chin up. His voice was vibrant, resonant, purposeful; his eyes glowed with serious and lofty enthusiasm: no muscle quivered to a smile.

“Why, there is philosophy in it! The one unvarying factor of the human mind,” he went on, “is the firm, unbiased conviction that I am right, and all opposition necessarily, consciously and wilfully wrong. This belief is the base and foundation of all human institutions, of sectionalism, caste, creeds, parties, states, of patriotism itself. It is the premise on which all wars are based. Mark, now, how human nature speaks from its elemental depths in the calm, complacent, but entirely sincere assumption that all good men and true will be unconditionally with the party!”

He warmed to his subject; he strode back and forth; he smote open palm with clenched fist in vehement gesture. Jeff snickered.

George rebuked him with a stern and withering glance.

“ I grant you that b, j, k, q, v, x and z are omitted. But what are b, j, k, q, v, x and z in comparison to the chaste perfection of this immortal line? Let them fitly typify the bad men and false who do not come to the aid of the party. Injustice is only what they deserve! ”

Consigning b, j, k, q, v, x and z to outer darkness with scornful, snapping fingers, he poured a glass of water, sipped it slowly, with resolute suppression of his Adam's apple, fixed Jeff with another severe glance, paused impressively, rose to his tiptoes with both hands outspread, and continued:

“ Why, sir, this is the grandest line in literature! It should hang on every wall, a text worked on a sampler by tender, loving hands! It is a ready-made watchword, a rallying cry for any great cause! It might

be sung by marching thousands. When, in a great crisis, the mighty statesman, the intellectual giant between whose puny legs we petty men do creep and peer about, has proclaimed the Fla-ag in Danger; has led us to stand at the parting of the ways; has shown that the nation must make irrevocable choice of good or evil; when our hearts are thrilled with the consciousness of our own virtue——” he sprang to a chair and flaunted his handkerchief in rhythmical waves——“ this, then, is his crashing peroration: ‘ Now is the time for all good men and true to come to the aid of the party! ’ ”

Bowing gracefully, he carefully parted imaginary coat-tails and seated himself, beaming.

Jeff lolled contentedly back in his chair, puffing out clouds of smoke. “ That’s a fine line of talk you get out. You sure did a wise thing when you quit the bank and took

to studying law. You have all the qualifications for a successful lawyer—or a barker for a sideshow.” He tapped out his pipe and yawned lazily. “I infer from your slurring remarks about solemn, silly twaddle that you are not permanently tagged, classified, labeled and catalogued, politically?”

“I am a consistent and humble follower,” replied George, “of the wise Democritus, who, as I will explain for the benefit of your benighted ignorance, is known as the Laughing Philosopher. I laugh. Therefore I can truthfully say, to paraphrase the words of a famous leader, ‘I am a Democrit!’”

Jeff showed his teeth. “I guess I am, too—but I didn’t know what it was till you told me. Now I have a party, at last—and now is the time for all good men and true—and that reminds me, my young and exuberant friend, that you have not yet told me when

our esteemed and respected employer intends to return."

"I do not quite like the tone you adopt in speaking of Mr. Simon Hibler," said George icily. "It smacks of irreverence and presumption. Still less do I relish your persistent reference to him as 'our' employer. It amounts to an assumption of a certain equality in our respective positions that I cannot for an instant tolerate." He strutted to the hearthrug and turned his back to the fire; he fiddled with his watch-chain; tone and manner were heavily pompous. "In a way, of course, Mr. Hibler might be said to employ us both. But I would have you realize that a vast gulf separates the social status of a lowly cow-servant, stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox, from that of an embryo Blackstone—like myself. I accept a position and receive a salary. You take a job and draw wages. Moreover, a lawyer's clerk

marries the youngest daughter and is taken into the firm. By the way, Hibler has no daughter. I must remind him of this. ‘Hibler & Aughinbaugh, Counselors at Law.’ That’ll look good in silver letters on a sanded, dark-blue background, eh, Jefferson? But soft! methinks my natural indignation has diverted me from your question. No, my good fellow, I do not know when Mr. Hibler is returning to El Paso. Are you already tired of urban delights, Mr. Bransford?”

“I was tired of urban delights,” remarked Mr. Bransford, “before you were out of short dresses. However, I’ve waited this long and I’ll stay right here in El Paso till he comes. I bore myself some, daytimes, but we have bully good times of nights. You’re as good as a show—better. Tune up your Julius Cæsar!”

“Your attitude—if you will overlook the involuntary rhyme,” said George, “is one of

base ingratitude. I endeavor to instruct and uplift you. You might be absorbing sweetness and light at every pore, acquiring a love for the true, the good and the beautiful—and you are merely amused! It is disheartening. As for this golden volume, this masterpiece of William Shakspeare's genius—‘which, pardon me, I do not mean to read’——”

“Oh, go on! Of course you're going to read it. We've got almost through it. You left off just beyond ‘the-will-give-us-the-will, we-will-have-the-will.’ ”

“Why, you lazy pup, why didn't you read it yourself? You have nothing to do. I have to work.”

“I did read it through to-day. And began at the first again. But,” said Jeff admiringly, “I like to hear you read it. You have such a lovely voice, Mr. Crow.”

Aughinbaugh bowed. "Thank you, Mr. Bransford, thank you! But I am proof against even such subtle and insidious flattery as yours. Hereafter, sir, I shall read no book through to you. I shall select works suited to your parts and your station in life and read barely enough to stimulate your sluggish mind. Then you can shell corn or be buried alive. To-night, for instance, I shall read some salient extracts from Carlyle's 'French Revolution.' You will not in the least understand it, but your interest and curiosity will be aroused. You will then finish it, with such collateral reading as I shall direct."

"Sure you got all those 'shalls' and 'wills' just right?" suggested Jeff. "It's mighty easy to get 'em tangled up."

"That is the only proper way to study history," George went on, wisely ignoring the

interruption. "Read history lightly, about some period, then read the best works of poetry or fiction dealing with the same events. Then come back to history again. The characters will be real people to you and not mere names. You will eagerly extend your researches to details about these familiar acquaintances and friends, and learn particulars that you would else have shirked as dull and laborious." He took a book from the shelf. "I will now read to you—after you replenish the fire—a few chapters here and there, especially there, dealing with the taking of the Bastille."

Without, a wild March wind shrilled and moaned at the trembling casements; within, firelight's cozy cheer, Aughinbaugh's slim youth lit by the glowing circle of the shaded lamp, the dusky corners beyond. The flexible voice sank with pity or swelled with hot indignation. And Bransford, as he listened

to that stupendous, chaotic drama of incoherent clangorous World Bedlam, saw, in the glowing coals, tumultuous, dim-confused figures come and go, passionate, terrible and grim; the young, the gay, the beautiful, the brave, the brave in vain; fire-hearted, vehement, proud, swallowed up by delirium. Newer shapes, wild, portentous, spluttering, flashing, whirling, leaping in wild dervish dance. In the black shadows, in the eddying thick smoke, lurked crowding shapes more terrible still, abominable, malignant, demoniacal, imbecile—Proteus shapes that changed, dwindled, leaped and roared to an indistinguishable sulphurous whirlpool, sport of all the winds. Brief flashes of clearer light there were, as the smoke billowed aside; faces gleamed a moment distinct, resolute, indomitable, bright-sparkling; blazed high—and fell, trampled down by fresh legion-changing apparitions. Sad visions,

some monstrous, some heroic, all pitiful; thronging innumerable, consuming and consumed.

.

“Likewise ashlar stones of the Bastille continue thundering through the dusk; its paper archives shall fly white. Old secrets come to view; and long buried despair finds voice. Read this portion of an old letter: ‘If for my consolation monseigneur would grant me, for the sake of God and the most blessed Trinity, that I should have news of my dear wife; were it only her name on a card to show that she is alive! It were the greatest consolation I could receive; and I should forever bless the greatness of monseigneur.’ Poor prisoner, who signest thyself Quéret-Démery, and hast no other history, she is dead, that dear wife of thine, and thou art dead! ’Tis fifty years since thy breaking heart put this question; to be

heard now first, and long heard, in the hearts of men."

.

A long silence. The fire was low. One dim, blurred form was there—an old man, writing, in a stone cell.

Aughinbaugh closed the book. His eyes were moist. "One of the greatest novels ever written, 'The Tale of Two Cities,' is based entirely upon and turns upon this last paragraph. Read that to-morrow and then come back to the 'French Revolution.' You'll be around to-morrow night?"

Jeff rose, laughing. "You remind me of my roommate at school."

"Your—what? Where?" said George in astonishment.

"Oh, yes, I've been to school, but not very long. When the boys used to stay too late he'd yawn and say to me: 'Jeff, perhaps we'd

better go to bed. These people may want to go home! ” ”

“ Oh, well, it’s nearly twelve o’clock,” said George, unabashed. “ And I have to work if you don’t. Bless you, my children, bless you! Be happy and you will be good! *Buenas noches!* ”

“ *Buenas noches!* ”

.
A trolley car whirred by, with scintillation of blue-crackling sparks. Jeff elected to walk, companied by his storied ghosts—their footsteps sounded through the rustling leaves. The wind was dead; the night was overcast, dark and chill. Aughinbaugh’s lodgings were in the outskirts of the residence section; the streets at this hour were deserted. Jeff had walked briskly for ten minutes when, as he neared a corner in a quiet neighborhood, he saw a tall man in gray come from the farther side of the intersecting street just

ahead. The gray man paused under the electric light to let a recklessly-driven cab overtake and pass him, and then turned diagonally over toward Jeff, whistling as he came. He was half-way across, and Jeff was within a yard of the corner, when another man, short and squat, hurried from the street to the left, brushing by so close that Jeff might have touched him. So unexpected was his appearance—for his footsteps had been drowned by the clattering cab—that Jeff was startled. He paused, midstep, for the merest fraction of a second. The town clock boomed midnight.

Thereafter, events moved with all the breathless unreality of dream. The second man turned across to meet the first. A revolver leaped up, shining in the light; he fired pointblank. The gray man staggered back. Yet, taken all unaware, so deadly swift he was that both men fired now together.

Nor was Jeff imprudently idle. He was in the line of fire, directly behind the short man. To the left, across the sidewalk, the bole of a tree was just visible beyond the house corner. Jeff leaped for this friendly shelter—and butted headlong into human ribs.

A one-hundred-and-sixty-pound projectile deals no light blow, and Jeff's initial velocity was the highest he could command at such slight notice. The owner of the ribs reeled out into the street, beyond the shadows. A huge man, breathless, gasping, with a revolver drawn; his thumb was on the hammer. So much Jeff knew and closed on him, his left hand clutched the gun, the hammer was through his finger. They wrenched and tore at the gun; and had the bigger man grappled now he might have crushed Jeff at once, broken him by main strength. But he was a man of one idea—and he had a second gun.

A violent jerk threw Jeff to his knee, but he kept his desperate grip. The second gun flashed in the giant's left hand, rising and falling with the frontier firing motion; but Jeff's own gun was out, he struck up the falling death, the bullet sang above him. He was on his feet, in trampling, unreal struggle; again he struck the gun aside as it belched fire. Turning, whirling, straining, Jeff was dizzily conscious that the men beneath the light were down, both still shooting; the cab had stopped, men were running toward him shouting. The giant's dreadful strength was undirected, heaving and thrusting purposeless; time for order and response would be time for crashing death to find him; his one frantic thought was to shoot first, to shoot fast. Shaken, tossed and thrown, Jeff kept his feet, kept his head, kept close in; as the great man's gun rose and fell he parried with his own. Three shots, four—the others fired

no longer; five—one more—Six! It was warded, Jeff drew back, fired his first shot from his hip; the giant dragged at him, heaved forward, and struck out mightily, hammer-wise. Jeff saw the blow gleaming down as he fired again. Glint of myriad lights streamed sparkwise across an infinite blackness; he knew no more.

The clock was still striking.

Chapter III

“Please go 'way and let me sleep,
I would rather sleep than eat!”

—*The Sluggard.*

“**H**E'S coming round. That man's suddenly got a cast-iron skull. Such a blow with a .45 would 'a' killed most fellers. What you goin' to do with him, Judge?”

“I don't know. It strikes me that he would be a valuable man for us. That was the nerviest performance I ever saw. Had I been told that any one could mix it that way with Oily Broderick and two guns, and get off with it scot-free except for this little love tap, I should never have believed it.” The voice was rich, clear, slow, well-modulated. “Perhaps he may be induced to join us. If not——”

The words reached Jeff from immeasurable distances. He was floating on a particularly soft and billowy cloud at the time: a cloud with a buoyant and undulant motion, very soothing. Jeff noted it with approval. Underneath and a little ahead, a high and exceedingly steep mountain rose abruptly from the sea. It was built entirely of piled, roundish boulders. The contour seemed familiar. Madagascar, of course! How clever of him to remember! Jeff turned the cloud. It sank in slow and graceful spirals to the peak. Doubtless the voices came from there. The words seemed to have an unexplained connection with some circumstance that he could not quite recall. He felt the elusive memory slipping away. However, it made no difference. He drifted into a delicious vagueness.

Something hard was forced between his teeth; a fiery liquid trickled down his throat.

He gasped and struggled; his eyes fluttered open. To his intense disappointment the cloud was gone. An arm was propping him up. Mysterious blankets appeared before him from somewhere or other. On them lay an arm and a bandaged hand. The hand was hurting some one very much. Jeff wondered whose it was. He looked at the hand fixedly for a long time and, on further examination, found it to be his own. Here was a pretty state of affairs!

A pillow was thrust behind him and the supporting arm withdrawn. At once he felt a throbbing pain in his head. He put his hand up and lo! his head was also heavily bandaged! He regretted Madagascar more than ever. He settled back for reflection. Looking up, after a little, he saw a chair with the back turned toward him; astride the chair, a middle-aged man, large, clean-shaven, rosy, well-dressed, and, as it seemed to Jeff,

unnecessarily cheerful. His eyes twinkled; his hands, which were white and plump and well kept, played a little ditty on the chair-back. There was a ruby on one finger. Beyond him sat a gross, fat man with a stubbly beard, a coarse, flat nose and little, piggish, red eyes. His legs were crossed and he smoked a villainous pipe. There were other men behind these two. Jeff was just turning to look at them when his attention was recalled by a voice from the man astride the chair.

“And how are we now, my young friend? A trifle dazed, I fancy? Something of a headache?” He showed his white teeth in a friendly smile; his voice was soft and playful. “Are we well enough to eat something? What with our recent disagreeable shock and our long abstinence from food, we must find ourself rather feeble.”

Jeff stared at the man while he digested

this communication. "A little coffee," he said at last. "I can't eat anything now. I am dizzy and most everlasting sick at my stomach. Put out that damned pipe!"

The soft-voiced man chuckled delightedly, as if he found this peremptory command exquisitely humorous. "You hear, Borrowman? Evidently Mr. Bransford is of those who want what they want when they want it. Bring a little soup, too. He'll feel better after he drinks his coffee."

The man addressed as Borrowman disappeared with a shuffling gait. Jeff lay back and considered. His half-shut eyes wandered around. Whitewashed stone walls, a heavily-ironed door, no window—that was queer, too!—floor and ceiling of rough boards, a small fireplace, two chairs, a pine table, a lighted lamp. That was all. His gaze came back to the man in the chair, to find that gentleman's large blue eyes watch-

ing him with a quizzical and humorous look—a look highly suggestive of a cat enjoying a little casual entertainment with a mouse. In his weakened condition Jeff found this feline regard disconcerting.

The coffee came, and the soup. After Jeff's refreshment the man in the chair rose. "We will leave you to the care of our good Borrowman," he said, baring his white, even teeth. "I will be back this evening and, if you are stronger, we will then discuss some rather momentous affairs. Go to sleep now."

The caressing advice seemed good. Jeff was just dropping off when a disturbing thought intruded itself.

This evening? Then it must be day now. Why did they burn a lamp in daytime? The problem was too much for Jeff. Still pondering it, he dozed off.

When he woke the lamp was yet burning; the objectionable fat man sat by the fire.

When he turned his head, presently, Jeff was startled to observe that this man had got hold of an entirely new set of features. Here was an extraordinary thing! Hard features, and unprepossessing still, but clean at least. How very curious!

After a while a simple solution presented itself. It was not the same man at all! Jeff wondered why he had not hit upon that at first. It seemed that he had now become a body entirely surrounded by fat men—no—that wasn't right. "Let me—let me name the Supreme Court of a nation and I care not who makes the laws." No, that was John Wesley Pringle's gag. Good old Wes! Wonder where he is? He wasn't fat. How did that go? Oh, yes! "Let me have men about me that are fat!"—Something snapped—and Jeff remembered.

Not all at once. He lay silent, with closed eyes, and pieced together scraps of recollec-

tion, here and there, bit by bit. It was like a picture puzzle; so much so that Jeff quite identified each random memory with some definite shape, eagerly fitting them together in a frame; and, when he had adjusted them satisfactorily to a perfect square, fell peacefully asleep.

Chapter IV

“Good fellow, thy shooting is good,
An’ if thy heart be as good as thy hand,
Thou art better than Robin Hood.”

—*Guy of Gisborne.*

WHEN he woke the soft-voiced, white-handed man again sat beside the bed, again in the same equestrian attitude, clasping the back of the chair, beaming with good humor.

“And how is our young friend now? Much better, I trust. We have had a long and refreshing sleep. Is our brain quite clear?”

Here the fat man—the less ill-favored one—rose silently from beside the fire and left them.

“Our young friend is extremely hungry,”

said Jeff. "Our young friend's brain is clear, but our young friend's head is rather sore. Where am I? In jail?" He sat up and pushed back the bandage for clearer vision.

The jovial gentleman laughed—a merry and mellow peal. "What a spirited fellow you are! And what an extremely durable headpiece you have! A jail? Well, not exactly, my dear fellow, not exactly. Let us say, in a cache, in a retreat, sometimes used by gentlemen wishing temporary retirement from society. You are also, though I grieve to say it, in a jackpot—to use a phrase the precise meaning and origin of which I do not comprehend, but which seems to be, in the vernacular, a synonym for the more common word predicament." He shook his head sorrowfully. "A very sad predicament, indeed! Quite unintentionally, and in obedience to a chivalrous impulse—which does you great credit, I assure you—

you have had the misfortune to mar a very-well-laid plan of mine. Had I not been a quick thinker, marvelously fertile in expedients, your officiousness would have placed me in an awkward quandary. However, in the very brief time at my disposal I was able to hit upon a device equally satisfactory—I may say even more satisfactory than the original.”

“Hold on!” said Jeff. “I don’t quite keep up. You planned a midnight assassination which did not go off smoothly. I’ve got that. You were one of the men in the cab. There was a fight——”

“There was, indeed!” interrupted the genial gentleman. His eyes lit up with enthusiasm; his shapely fingers tapped the chair back. “Such a fight! It was magnificent! Believe me, my dear Bransford, it inspired me with an almost affectionate admiration for you! And your opponent was a most

redoubtable person, with a sensitive trigger finger——”

“Excuse the interruption,” said Jeff. “But you seem to have the advantage of me in the matter of names.”

“So I have, so I have! As you will infer, I looked through your pockets. Thorpe is my name—S. S. Thorpe. Stay—here is my card. You will see that I am entitled to the prefix ‘Hon.,’ having been sometime State Senator. Call me Judge. I have never occupied that exalted position, but all the boys call me Judge. To go back—we were speaking of your opponent. Perhaps you knew him? No? Mr. Broderick, Mr. Oily Broderick, once of San Antonio, a man of some renown. We shall miss him, Mr. Bransford, we shall miss him! A very useful fellow! But your eyes ask the question—Dead? Dear me, yes! Dead and buried these many hours. He never knew what

ailed him. Both of your bullets found a vital spot. A sad loss! But I interrupt. I am much interested to see how nearly accurate your analysis of the situation will be."

"The short man—was he killed, too?" asked Jeff.

"The worthy Krouse was killed as well," said Judge Thorpe, sighing with comfortable resignation. "But Krouse was a negligible quantity. Amiable, but a bungler. Go on!"

"Your intended victim seems to have escaped——"

"Survived," corrected Judge Thorpe gently, with complacent inspection of his shapely hands. "Survived is the better word, believe me. Captain Charles Tillotson, Captain of the Rangers. An estimable gentleman, with whom, I grieve to say, I was not on the best of terms. To our political enmity, of long standing—and you perhaps

know that Southwestern politics are extremely bitter—has been added of late a certain social rivalry. But I digress. You were saying——”

“But you are prompting me,” said Jeff testily. “It is hardly necessary. Your enemy not being killed outright, you choose to assassinate his good name, juggling appearances to make it seem that he was the murderer—and to that end you have spirited me away.”

“Exactly! You are a man after my own heart—a man of acumen and discernment,” said Judge Thorpe, beaming, “although I did, as you suggest, prompt you at some points—knowing that you were not familiar with all the premises. Really, Mr. Bransford, though I would not unduly exalt myself, I cannot help but think my little device showed more than mere talent. It was, considering the agitating circumstances, consider-

ing that both conception and execution had to be instantaneous, little less than Napoleonic! I feel sure that when I tell you the details you will share my enthusiasm."

Jeff was doing some quick thinking. He recalled what he had heard of Thorpe. He was best known as a powerful and wealthy politician of El Paso, who in his younger days had been a dangerous gunfighter. Of late years, however, he had become respected and reputable, his youthful foibles forgotten.

The appalling frankness of this avowal could bode no good to Jeff. Evidently he was helplessly in this man's power, and his life had been spared for some sinister and shameful purpose.

"Before you favor me with any more details, Judge," said Jeff, "can't you give me an old boot to chew on?"

"What wonderful spirits, what splendid

nerves! I compliment you!" said the Judge. "Our good Mac went, when you first awoke, to prepare steak, eggs and coffee for you. You will pardon us if we do not have your meals brought in from a restaurant. It would not do. We are quiet here, we do not court observation. For the same reason we have been forced to abstain from medical attendance for you, otherwise so desirable. I, myself, have filled that office to the best of my ability. Now as to the replenishing of the inner man. Mac is an excellent cook."

"Cleaner than Borrowman," said Jeff.

"And is, as you observe, much cleaner than Borrowman. He will prepare whatever the market affords. You have only to ask. And, while we are waiting, I will return to my story."

"I was, as you so readily surmised, in the cab, together with my good friend, colleague and lieutenant, Mr. Sam Patterson. We had

telephoned ahead to Krouse and Broderick that Tillotson was on his way. We were to be witnesses that Krouse acted purely in self-defense, you know—as, indeed, were also the cab driver and Broderick. Broderick was to hold himself in reserve and not to assist, except in case of mishap. We supposed that Krouse would kill Tillotson without difficulty. Krouse bungled. He inflicted three wounds, painful but not dangerous; including one which creased the scalp and produced unconsciousness.”

The man took such shameless delight in parading his wickedness that Jeff began to wonder if, after all, it would not have saved himself much difficulty if Broderick had killed him. But he set his mind like a flint to thwart this smiling monster at any cost.

The Judge went on: “Such was the distressing situation when I came up. Some men would have finished Tillotson on the

spot. But I kept my presence of mind; I exercised admirable self-restraint. It would be but an instant before the aroused neighborhood would be on the street. We bundled you and your gun into the cab and the driver hurried you away to a certain rendezvous of ours. To have done with the driver, I will say at this time that he came in and gave his testimony the next day very effectively, fully confirming ours; accounting for his conduct by the very natural excuse that he was scared and so ran away lest he should be shot.

“The gun in Broderick’s right hand, you may remember, had not been fired. His stiffening fingers still held it. I picked up his other gun, unbuckled his belt, buckled it around Tillotson, and dropped Broderick’s empty gun by him. No more was needed. The populace found me caring for Captain Tillotson like a brother, pouring whisky down

him—and thereby heaping coals of fire on his head.

“Now, as to our evidence. As you may readily guess, we were driving by when the trouble began. We saw Captain Tillotson when he fired the first shot, killing Broderick with it. He continued to shoot after Broderick dropped; Krouse, defending his friend, was killed also, wounding Tillotson, who kept on shooting blindly after he fell. The circumstantial evidence, too, was damning, and bore us out in every respect. Broderick, a man of deadly quickness, had been killed before he could shoot. Tillotson had emptied one gun and fired four shots from the other; his carrying two guns pointed toward deliberate, fore-planned murder. The marks on the houses, made by a number of his wild bullets, were in a line directly beyond Broderick’s body from where Tillotson lay. Broderick was between you and the others, you

know," explained the Judge parenthetically. "But as nothing is known of you, the marks of Broderick's bullets are supposed to be made by Tillotson's—incontrovertible evidence that he began the fighting."

Nothing could have been more hateful, more revolting, than this bland, smiling complacency: Jeff's fingers itched to be at his throat. It became clear to him that either this man would be his death, or, which was highly improbable, the other way about. His resolution hardened; he began to have visions of this smiling face above a noose.

"When Tillotson regained consciousness he told a most amazing story, obviously conflicting with the facts. He had carried but one gun; Krouse had made a wanton attack upon him, without warning; he had returned the fire. Simultaneously Broderick had been killed by some fourth man, a stranger, whom Tillotson did not know, and who had mys-

teriously disappeared when the people of the neighborhood arrived. It looks very black for Captain Tillotson," purred the Judge, shaking his hands and head sorrowfully. "Even those who uphold him do not credit this wildly-improbable tale. It is universally thought that his wealth and position will not save him from the noose. El Paso is reforming; El Paso is weary of two-gun men.

"And now, my dear Bransford, comes the crucial point, a matter so delicate that I hesitate to touch upon it. All of my ingenious little impromptu was built and founded on the natural hypothesis of your demise, which, in my haste, I did not stop to verify. It did not occur to me as among the possibilities that any man—even myself—could weather six shots, at hand-grips, from Oily Broderick. Imagine, then, my surprise and chagrin when I learned that you were not even seriously hurt! It was a shock, I assure you! But

here comes Mac with the tray. I will bathe your hands, Mr. Bransford. Then I beg that you will fall to at once. We will discourse while you break your fast."

"Oh, I can get up," said Jeff. "I'm not hurt. Put it on the table."

Chapter V

“Quoth Robin, ‘I dwell by dale and down
By thee I set right naught.’”

—*Guy of Gisborne.*

“**I** PERCEIVE,” said the Judge, surveying the tempting viands, “that Mac has thoughtfully cut your meat for you. You are provided with many spoons, but neither knife nor fork. A wise and wholesome precaution, I may remark. After your recent exploit we stand quite in awe of you. Pray be seated. I will take a cup of coffee with you—if you will allow me?”

“It will not have escaped a man of your penetration that an obvious course was open to me. But your gallantry had quite won my heart, and I refrained from that obvious course, though strongly urged to it. Mac, tell Mr. Bransford what your advice was.”

"I said: 'Dead men tell no tales!'" replied Mac sturdily. "And I say it again. Yon is a fearsome man."

"You are a dangerous man yourself, Mac. Yet I trust you. And why? Because," said the Judge cooingly, "I am more dangerous still—leader by right of the strongest. I admire you, Mr. Bransford; I needed such a man as you seem to be. Moreover, singular as it may seem, I boggled at cutting you off in cold blood. I have as good a heart as can be made out of brains. You had not intentionally harmed me; I bore you no grudge; it seemed a pity. I decided to give you a chance. I refused this advice. If you but knew it, Mr. Bransford, you owe me a heavy debt of gratitude. So we brought you across quite unostentatiously. That brings us up to date.

"You see the logic of the situation, my dear fellow? Your silence must be insured.

Either you must throw in your lot with us, commit yourself entirely and irrevocably to us, or suffer the consequences of—shall we say, your indiscretion? ”

The Judge sipped his coffee daintily. “It is distressing even to mention the alternative; it is needless to lay undue emphasis upon it; circumstances have already done that. You see for yourself that it must be thus, and not otherwise.”

Jeff took a toothpick, pushed his chair back and crossed his legs comfortably. “I must have time to consider the matter and look at it from all sides,” he said meditatively. “But I can tell you now how it strikes me at first blush. Do you believe in presentiments, Judge? ”

The Judge shook his head. “I am singularly free from all superstition.”

“Now, I do,” said Jeff steadily, his face wearing as engaging an expression as its

damaged condition would permit. "And I have a very strong presentiment that I shall see you hung, or perhaps I should say, hanged."

The Judge went off in another peal of laughter. Even the saturnine Mac relaxed to a grim smile. The Judge pounded on the table. "But what a droll dog it is!" he cried. "Positively, I like you better every moment. Such high spirits! Such hardihood! Really, we need you, we must have you. I cannot imagine any one better fitted to fill the place of the departed brother whom you—as the instrument of an inscrutable and all-wise Providence—have removed from our midst."

At this disloyalty to the dead, Jeff's gorge rose at the man; treacherous, heartless, revolting. But he kept a tranquil, untroubled face. The Judge went on: "Your resolution may change. You will suffer from

ennui. I may mention that, should you join us, the pecuniary reward will be great. I am wealthy and powerful, and our little organization—informal, but very select—shares my fortunes. They push me up from below and I pull them up from above. I will add that we seldom find it necessary to resort to such extreme measures as we did in the Tillotson case. He was a very troublesome man; he has been a thorn in my side for years.

“On the contrary, we conduct many open and perfectly-legitimate enterprises, political, legal, financial. We are interested in mining propositions; we have cattle ranches in Texas and Old Mexico; we handle real estate. As side lines, we do a miscellaneous business—smuggle a vast amount of opium and a few Chinamen, keep sanctuary for unhappy fugitives, jump good mines and sell poor ones, furnish or remove witnesses—Oh,

many things! But, perhaps, our greatest activity is simply to exert moral pressure in aid of our strictly-legitimate enterprises.

“Tut, tut! I have been so charmed that I have overstayed my time. Think this matter over carefully, my dear fellow. There is much to gain or to lose. You shall have ample time for consideration. Mac and Borrowman will get you anything you want, within the bounds of reason—clothes, books, tobacco, such knickknacks. And, by the way, here are yesterday’s papers. You may care to read the Tillotson case. The editorials, both those that condemn him and those that defend, are particularly amusing.”

“Mac and Borrowman are to be my jailers?” said Jeff.

The Judge raised his hands in expostulation. “Jailers?” he repeated. “What a harsh term! Let us say, companions. You

might break out of jail," said the Judge, tapping Jeff's breast with his strong fingers, "but you will not get away from me. They will tell you their instructions. I will attend to your hurts, now, and then I must go."

"I would like clean clothes," said Jeff, while the Judge dressed his wounds skilfully. "A safety razor—they can keep it when I'm not using it—the daily papers, cigars, tobacco—let me see, what else? Oh, yes—I was trying to learn the typewriter. I'd like to try it again when my finger gets better. For books, send in Shakspeare's works and Carlyle's 'French Revolution,' for the present."

"You're quite sure that's all?" said the Judge, entertained and delighted. "You must intend to take your time about making up your mind."

"My mind is entirely made up now. I

would insure you against a watery death," said Jeff with utmost calmness, "for a dime!"

"We shall see, we shall see!" said the Judge skeptically. "Time works many wonders. You will be ennuied! I prophesy it. Besides, I count upon your gratitude. Good-night!"

"Good-night!"

.

So you "brought me unostentatiously across," did you? You made a slip that time. You talk well, Judge, but you talk too much. Across? Across the Rio Grande. I am in Juarez. I had already guessed it, for I hear the sounds of many whistling engines from far off, and but few from near at hand. My prison is underground, since those whistles are the only sounds that reach me, and they muffled and indistinct; coming by the fireplace. That chimney goes through

a house above, since they keep up a fire.
What to do?

Through the long hours he lay on his bed, sleepless. When he opened his eyes, at intervals, it was always to find the guard's face toward him, watching him intently. They were taking no chances.

His vigorous brain was busy with the possibilities; contriving, hopeless as the situation might seem, more than one scheme, feasible only to desperation, and with terrible odds against success. These he put by to be used only as a last recourse, and fell to his Sisyphean task again with such concentration of all his powers upon the work in hand as few men have ever dreadful need to attain—such focused concentration that, had his mind been an actual searchlight, capable, in its turning, to throw a shining circle upon actual, living, moving men, in all places, far or near, in time past, present or to come—where it

paused, the places, men and events could not have been more real, more clear, more brightly illumined. When this inner light wearied and grew faint he turned it back till it pierced the thick walls to another prison, dwelt on another prisoner there: a tall, gray figure, whose face was turned away; ringed round with hate, with ignominy, shame despair and death; not friendless. And the light rose again, strong and unwavering, ranging the earth for what help was there; so fell at last upon a plan, not after to be altered. A rough plan only—the details to be worked out—to-morrow and to-morrow. So thinking, utter exhaustion came upon him and he fell asleep.

Chapter VI

“The bosun’s mate was very sedate, but fond of amusement too,

So he played hop-sotch with the larboard watch,
while the Captain tickled the crew.”

—*Ballad of The Walloping Window Blind.*

“**A**ND what are these famous instructions of yours, Mac?”

“They are verra precise, Mr. Bransford. One of us will be always in the room. That one will keep close and constant watch upon you, even when you are asleep. Your wound will be dressed only when we are both here. Coal and water, your meals, the things you send for, will be brought in only when we are both here. And on any slightest cendication of an attempted rescue or escape we are to kill you without hesitation!”

It was plain that Mac was following the manner as well as the matter of his instructions. He gave this information slowly, with dour satisfaction, checking each item by forcibly doubling down, with his right hand, the fingers of his left. Having now doubled them all down, he undoubled them and began again.

"If you attempt to give any alarm, if you attempt to make any attack, if on any pretext you try to get near enough for a possible attack, we will kill you without hesitation." He rolled the phrase under his tongue with great relish.

"Your precautions are most flattering, I'm sure," said Jeff idly. "I must be very careful. The room is large, but I might inadvertently break your last rule at any time. If I understand you correctly, should I so much as drop my pencil and, picking it up, forgetfully come too close——"

"I will shoot you," repeated this uncompromising person, "without any hesitation. I have a verra high opeenion of your powers, Mr. Bransford, and have no mind to come to grips wi' you. You will keep your distance, and we will agree fine."

"All this is like to be very tiresome to you." Jeff's tones were level and cheerful; he leaned back in his chair, yawning; his hands were clasped behind his head. "Such constant vigilance will be a strain upon you; your nerves will be affected. I will have by far the best of it. I can sleep, read, think. But if you turn your head, if you close your eyes, if you so much as falter in your attention," said Jeff dispassionately, "my fingers will be at your throat to tear your life out for the dog that you are!"

"Why, now we understand each other perfectly," returned Mac, in nowise discom-

posed. "But I would have ye to observe that your last remark was highly discourteous. My instructions are not yet ended. Look now!" He held up his hand, with three fingers still tightly closed to indicate three several unhesitancies. "Our last instruction was to treat you with ceeveelity and consideration, to give you any indulgence which would not endanger your safe keeping, to subject you to no indignity or abuse." He folded down the fourth finger and extended his closed hand, thrusting out his thumb reproachfully. "To no abuse!" he repeated.

"I am properly rebuked," said Jeff. "I withdraw the 'dog.' Let me amend the offending remark to read thus: 'to tear out your life without any hesitation.' But even the remarkable foresight of Judge Thorpe seems to have overlooked one important thing. I refer to the possible corruption of

my jailers. Do I likewise forfeit my life if I tamper with your integrity?"

His grim guardian chose to consider this query as extremely facetious. His leathern face wrinkled to cavernous gashes, indicative of mirth of a rather appalling sort; he emitted a low rumble that might be construed, in a liberal translation, as laughter; his words took on a more Scottish twist. "You might try it on Borrowman," he said. "Man, you've a taking way with you! 'Tis fair against my advice and sober judgment that ye are here at all—but I am bequeening to feel your fasceenations! Now that ye're here I e'en have the hope that ye will be weel advisit. I own it, I would be but loath to feed so gay and so plain-dealing a man to the feeshes!"

These two had many such skirmishes as the days went by: slow, dragging days, perpetually lamp-lit, their passage measured

only by the irregularly-changing guards and the regular bringing in of the daily papers.

Jeff timed his sleeping hours to come on Borrowman's trick; finding that jailer dull, ferocious and unendurable. His plan was long since perfected, and now he awaited but the opportunity of putting it into execution.

The Judge had called—as a medical adviser, he said—pronounced Jeff's progress all that could be desired, and touched upon their affair with argument, cajolery and airy badinage. Jeff had asked permission to write to his wife, to send some message, which the Judge might dictate; any sort of a story, he implored, to keep her from alarm and anxiety; which petition the Judge put merrily by, smiling at the absurdity of such request.

In his waking hours Jeff read the papers. Tillotson was mending, his trial would be soon. He read his books, sometimes aloud;

he chaffed his jailer; he practised on the typewriter, but never, in his practice, wrote off any appeal for aid to good men and true, or even the faintest suggestion that a quick move by the enemy would jeopardize any possible number of gunboats. Instead, Jeff undertook to produce another "speed sentence." He called Mac to his assistance, explaining his wants; and between them, with great glee, they concocted the following gem:

*He kept vexing me with frantic journeys
hidden by quiet zeal.*

They showed this effusion to the Judge with much pride, defying him to better it. Jeff pounded it off by the hour; he mingled fragments of it with his remarks in season and out.

There were long visits from the Judge. In his own despite Jeff grew to enjoy them and to look forward to them—so strange a

thing is man! The Judge was witty, cynical, informed, polished, keen, satirical. At times Jeff almost forgot what thing he was besides. Their talk ranged on many things, always in the end coming back to the same smiling query, the same unfaltering reply. Once, Patterson came with him—a younger man, with a brutal and bloated face—and urged the closing of the incident in clear and unmistakable terms.

And, as day followed day, Jeff let it appear—as a vital part of his plan—in his speech, his manner, his haggard looks, that danger, suspense and confinement were telling upon him, that he was worried and harassed, that he was losing his nerve. These things appeared slowly, lest he should seem to weaken too soon and too easily.

Chapter VII

“And when ’e downs ’is ’ead and ’umps ’is back,
ye cawn’t remain, y’ know!”

—*Beresford on the Bronco.*

“MY iron-headed friend,” said the Judge—“and I use the word in more senses than one—you have now had ample time for deliberation. I have given you the opportunity to choose—life——”

No menace, no violence, could have left an impression so strong, so dreadful in its finality, as this brief ellipsis, the casual, light-hearted manner.

“——at no slight risk to myself. Because, the admiration, the liking which I have professed to you is real and sincere enough, though, perhaps, none of the deepest. I will be quite frank with you, Mr. Bransford; that

liking, that admiration has grown with our acquaintance. A weakness; I admit it; it would be with a real regret that I should speak the word to cut that acquaintance short. I will be so much further frank with you as to say that I fancy I can sufficiently steel myself to speak that word should you again refuse good counsel. This may be the last of our pleasant meetings. For the last time, in the words of your favorite writer: 'Under which king, Bezonian? Speak, or die! ' "

Jeff's hands gripped visibly at his chair-arms, so that the Judge observed it—as was intended—and smiled. But Jeff gave his answer quietly: "I can't do it. If you had killed Tillotson outright I might, to save my life, keep silence and let you go unpunished. But I can't do this."

"You mean you won't," said the Judge acidly.

"I mean that I can't," said Jeff. "I would if I could, but I can't."

"By Heavens, I believe you will stick to it!" said the Judge, greatly disappointed. "Had you couched your refusal in some swelling phrase—and I can think of a dozen sonorous platitudes to fit the case—I might yet have hopes of you. I believe, sir, that you are a stubborn fellow. The man is nothing to you!"

"The man is much to me," returned Jeff. "He is innocent."

"So, I believe, are you. How will it help him for you to die? And so obscurely, too! I think," said the Judge gently, flicking at his cuff, "that you mentioned a wife? Yes? And children? Two, I think. Two boys?"

His elbows were upon the table, his white hands were extended upon the table, he held his head a little to one side and contemplated

his fingers as they played a little tune there, quite as if it were a piano.

Jeff's face worked; he rose and paced the floor. Mac, by the door, regarded him with something very like compassion in his hard face. The Judge watched him with feline amusement.

When he came back he passed by his chair; he stood beside the table, resting his fingers lightly on the typewriter frame. "Life is dear to me," he said, with a slight break in his voice. "I will make this one concession. More I will not do. Tillotson's trial is half over; the verdict is certain; there are powerful influences at work to insure the denial of an appeal and to hasten his execution. If you can keep me here until after his execution I will then—to save my life, for my wife's sake, for my children's sake—keep silence. And may God forgive me for a compromiser and a coward!" he added

with a groan. "But if, before that, I can make my escape; if, before that, I can in any way communicate with the outside world, I will denounce you, at any cost to myself."

The Judge would have spoken, but Jeff held up his hand. "Wait! I have listened to you—listen now to me. You have forgotten that there are two sides to every bargain. You sit directly between me and Mac, your hands are upon the table, your feet are beneath the table, the typewriter is at my hand. Do not move! If Mac stirs but an inch, if you dare raise a finger, until you have agreed to my proposition, by the God that made me, I will crush your skull like an egg!"

"Had ye wrung his neck off-hand, as I urgit upon ye frae the first——" The words came bitterly from Mac, sitting rigid in his corner—"this wadna have chancit." His tones conveyed a singular mixture of

melancholy and triumph; the thickening of his Scotch burr betrayed his agitation. "Be guidit by me noo at the last, Judge, and tak the daft body's terms. In my opeenion the project of smashin' your head wi' the machine is enteerly pract'ecable, and I think Mr. Bransford will e'en do it. Why should he no? A dead man has naught to fear. My gude word is, mak treaty wi' him and save your——"

"Neck. For this time," hinted Jeff delicately.

The Judge did not shrink, he did not pale; but neither did he move. "And your presentiment that you would see me hanged? You have abandoned that, it seems?"

"Not at all, not at all," said Jeff, cheerily. "You are going to do just what I propose. You'd rather take the chance of having your neck broken legally than the certainty that I'll break it now."

“With that thing? Humph! You couldn’t hurt me much with that. I think I could get up and away before you could hit me with it. And Mac would certainly shoot you before you could hit me a second time.”

“Once will be a-plenty.” Bransford laughed. “You go first, I beseech you, my dear Alphonse! O no, Judge—you don’t think anything of the kind. If you did you’d try it. Your legs—limbs, I mean of course—are too far under the table. And I’ve been practising for speed with this machine every day. What Mac does to me afterward won’t help you any. You’ll be done dead, damned and delivered. If he could shoot me now without shooting through you, it would be a different proposition. Your mistake was in ever letting me line you up. ‘Tit, tat, toe—Three in a row!’ Well, what are you going to do about it?”

“ Oh, man, ye chargit me streectly to keep this wild cat-a-mountain at his distance,” interrupted Mac in mournful reproach, “ and then pop ye down cheek by jowl wi’ the deil’s buckie your ainsel’. I’d as lief seat me to sup wi’ the black devil and his muckle pitchfork! ”

As often happens in such cases, the man who was in no immediate danger was more agitated than the one imperiled; who, after a moment’s reflection, looked up at Bransford with a smile in his eyes.

“ And how am I to know you will not denounce me if I let you go after this unfortunate Tillotson is hanged? ” he demanded. “ Or, for that matter, how are you to know that I will not kill you as soon as I am beyond the reach of your extremely novel weapon—which, I grant you, might be effective at such close quarters and in such capable hands—or that I will not have you killed

at any time hereafter? This," said the Judge, picking his words leisurely and contemplating his fine fingers with unreserved approval, "is the crux of the very interesting situation. Rigid moralists, scrutinizing the varied actions of my life, might find passages not altogether blameless. But I have always held and maintained that a man should keep faith where it is expressly pledged. This is the bedrock upon which is based all relations of man with man, and to no class is it so needful as to those who are at variance with society. If a man will not hold by his plighted word, even to his hurt, he has lost all contact with reality and is become henceforth no actuality, but a vain and empty simulacrum, not to be dealt with, useless either for good or evil. Here, for instance, are we, two intelligent men, confronting mutual instant annihilation; which might be avoided could each be perfectly sure the other

would keep his word! It is quite amusing!"

"I will take your word if you will take mine," said Jeff. "You should know who runs the greater risk. But I have a stipulation to make."

The Judge arched his brows. "A stipulation? Another? My volatile and resourceful friend, do not ask too much. It is by no means certain that your extraordinary missile—or was it to be a war-club?—might not fail of the desired effect. You have already stipulated for your life, and I think," said the Judge dryly, "that if you have any other demand to make, it had best be a modest one."

"I do not choose," said Jeff steadily, "that my wife shall suffer needless anxiety—unnecessary if you set me free at last. Still less do I choose, if I meet with foul play at your hands, or if I should be killed attempting an escape, to have her haunted by any doubt

of me. I shall write to her that I am in Old Mexico, in some part known to be dangerous, tempted by high pay. You will send it to be mailed down there. Then, if I do not come back, she will think of me as honorably dead, and be at peace."

It came into the Judge's active mind that such a letter—dated and signed from some far-off Mexican town—might, in some contingencies, be useful to him; his bold, blue eyes, which had faced an imminent death firmly enough, dropped now to hide the treacherous thought. And upon this thought, and its influence upon sending the letter, Jeff had counted from the first.

"There are other reasons," said Jeff. "You have been pleased to speak well of me. You have boasted, both for yourself and for me, enough and more than enough. Let me now boast for myself. Has it never occurred to you that such a man as I am would have

friends—formidable friends? That they are wondering what has become of me? If you agree to my arrangement, I have a chance of saving both my life and some shreds of decency. I do not now want my friends to come in search of me and get me killed in trying to rescue me—for you will, of course, redouble your precautions after this. This letter will put my friends at ease. I will have to trust you to mail it. That is the weakness of my position. But I will think that there is a chance that you will mail it—and that chance will help me to keep a quiet mind. That much, at least, will be a clear gain. Do this, and I will yield a point to you. If you would rather I didn't, I will not go to see you hanged!”

The amazing effrontery of this last coaxing touch so appealed to Judge Thorpe's sense of humor that he quite recovered his good nature. “My dear boy,” he said, “if I should

ever be hanged, I wouldn't miss having you there for worlds. It would add a zest to the occasion that I should grieve to lose. I will agree unconditionally to your proposed *modus vivendi*. As I understand it, if I can hang Tillotson you are to keep silence and go free. But if you can contrive to get me hanged you are to attend the festivity in person? It is a wager. Write your letter and I'll mail it. Of course, I'll have to read it and edit it if needed. And say—Bransford! I'll mail it, too! You can be at rest on that point. In the meantime, I presume, I may move without bringing the typewriter about my ears?"

"You may," said Jeff. "It's a bet. I wish you'd wait and I'll write the letter now. She'll be anxious about me. It'll take some time. I always write her long letters. Let me have your fountain-pen, will you?"

"Why don't you use your typewriter?" said the Judge. "And, by the way, I fear

we shall have to deprive you of your typewriter in the future."

"A typewritten letter wouldn't be consistent at all," said Jeff. "I am supposed to be writing from darkest Old Mexico. No typewriters there. Besides, I can't write with the damn thing to do any good. Say, don't take it away from me, Judge; there's a good fellow. I want to master it. I do hate to be beaten."

"The elasticity with which you adjust yourself to changing conditions is beyond all praise," said the Judge, smiling. "Like the other Judge, in the Bible, I yield to importunity. I can deny you nothing. Keep your typewriter, then, with the express understanding that its use as a deadly weapon is barred. Here's the pen."

Chapter VIII

"Alice's Right Foot, Esq.,
Hearthrug,
Near the Fender,
(With Alice's love)."

• • • • •
[•] • • • • [•]

"O, there be many systems
But only one that wins—
When leading from your strongest suit,
Just kick your partner's shins."

—*Hoyle.*

JEFF pulled the paper over and began to scribble madly; pausing from time to time to glance around for inspiration: at the Judge, at Mac, at the papers, the books, the typewriter. "I'll slip in a note for the kids," said Jeff. His lips moved, his eyes kindled in his eager absorption; his face took on a

softer and tenderer look. The Judge, watching him, beamed with almost paternal indulgence.

On the whole Jeff wrote with amazing swiftness for a man who professed to be unaccustomed to lying. For this communication, apparently so spontaneous, dashed off by a man hardly yet clear of the shadow of death, was learned by rote, no syllable unpremeditated, the very blots of it designed.

This is what he handed the Judge at last:

SAN MIGUEL, Chihuahua, March 24.

My dear Wife:

Since I last wrote you I have been on a long trip into the Yaqui country as guide, interpreter and friend to a timid tenderfoot—and all-round sharp from the Smithsonian. His main lay is Cliff-Dweller-ology, but he does other stunts—rocks and bugs

and Indian languages, and early Spanish relics.

I get big pay. I enclose you \$100——

“A hundred dollars! Why, this is blackmail!” remonstrated the Judge, grinning nevertheless.

“But,” said Jeff, “I’ve got to send it. She knows I wouldn’t stay away except for good big pay, and she knows I’ll send the big pay to her. I didn’t think you were a piker. Why, I had thirty dollars in my pocket. You won’t be out but seventy. And if you don’t send it she’ll know the letter is a fake. Besides, she needs the money.”

“I surrender! I’ll send it,” said the Judge, and resumed his reading:

——and will send you more when I get back from next trip. Going way down in the Sierra Madre this time. Don’t know

when we will hit civilization again, so you needn't write till you hear from me.

The Cliff-Dweller-ologist had the El Paso papers sent on here to him and I am reading them all through while he writes letters and reports and things. I am reading some of his books, too.

Mary, I always hated it because I didn't have a better education. I used to wonder if you wasn't sometimes ashamed of me when we was first married. But I've learned a heap from you and I've picked up considerable, reading, these last few years—and I begin to see that there are compensations in all things. I see a good deal in things I read now that I would have missed if I'd just skimmed over the surface when I was younger. For instance, I've just made the acquaintance of Julius Cæsar—introduced by my chief.

Say, that's a great book! And I just know I'm getting more out of it than if I'd

been familiar with it ever since I was a boy, with stone-bruises on my hoofs. I've read it over two or three times now, and find things every time that I didn't quite get before.

It ought to be called Yond Caius Cassius, though. Shakspeare makes Julius out to be a superstitious old wretch. But Julius had some pretty good hunches at that.

Of course Mark Antony's wonderful speech at the funeral was fine business. Gee! how he skinned the "Honorable men!" Some of the things he said after that will stand reading, too.

But Yond Cassius, he was the man for my money. He was a regular go-getter. If Brutus had only hearkened to Cassius once in a while they'd have made a different play of it. I didn't like Brutus near so well. He was a four-flusher. Said he wouldn't kill himself and sure enough he did. He was set

up and heady and touchy. I shouldn't wonder if he was better than Cassius, just morally. I guess maybe that's why Cassius knuckled down to him and humored him so. But intellectually, and as a man of action, he wasn't ace-high to Cassius.

Still there's no denying that Brutus had a fine line of talk. There was his farewell to Cassius—you remember that—and his parting with his other friends.

I've been reading Carlyle's "French Revolution" too. It's a little too deep for me, so I take it in small doses. It looks to me like a great writer could take a page of it and build a book on it.

Well, that's all I know. Oh, yes! I tried to learn typewriting when I was in El Paso—I musn't forget that. I made up a sentence with all the letters in it—he kept vexing me by frantic journeys hidden with quiet zeal—I got so I could rattle that off pretty well,

but when I tried new stuff I got balled up.

Will write you when I can. George will know what to do with the work. Have the boys help him.

Your loving husband,

JEFF.

Dear Kids:

I wish you could see some of the places I saw in the mountains. We took the train to Casas Grandes and went with a pack outfit to Durasno and Tarachi, just over the line into Sonora. That's one fine country. Had a good time going and coming, but when we got there and my chief was snooping around in those musty old underground cave houses I was bored a-plenty. One day I remember I lay in camp with nothing to do and read every line of an old El Paso paper, ads and all.

Leo, you're getting to be a big boy now.

I want you to get into something better than punching cows. When you get time you ought to go down to your Uncle Sim's and make a start on learning to use a typewriter. I've been trying it myself, but it's hard for an old dog to learn new tricks.

You and Wesley must both help your mother, and help George. Do what George tells you—he knows more about things than you do. Be good kids. I'll be home just as soon as I can.

DAD.

"There," said Jeff, "if there's anything you want to blue-pencil I'll write it over. Anything you want to say suits me so long as it goes."

"Why, this seems all right," said the Judge, after reading it. "I have an envelope in my billbook. Address it, but don't seal it. You might attempt to put in some

inclosure by sleight-of-hand. If you try any such trick I shall consider myself absolved from any promise. If you don't, I'll mail it. I always prefer not to lie when I have nothing to gain by lying. Bless my soul, how you have blotted it!"

"Yes. I'm getting nervous," said Jeff.

The envelope bore the address:

MRS. JEFF BRANSFORD,

Rainbow South,

Escondido, N. M.

c/o WILLIAM BEEBE.

"Of course you will do as you like," remonstrated Patterson, later. "But I shouldn't send that letter, and I should, without any further delay, erase Mr. Bransford's name from the list of living men."

"Tush!" said the Judge. "The letter is harmless. The man is a splendid fighter, and has some practical notion of psychology, but

the poor fellow has no imagination. In his eagerness, he made his letter up on the spur of the moment. There is scarcely a line in it but was suggested by his surroundings. His haste and affection made him transparent; I followed the workings of his mind and, except for personalities, anticipated practically all of it.

“As for killing him, I shall do nothing of the kind. I made a bargain with him in the very article of death and I shall keep to it. He cannot escape; it is not possible. Besides, I like the man. Hang it, Patterson, he is what I would wish my son to be, if I had one. I’ll not kill him and I’ll send his letter.”

He did send it. It reached Billy Beebe some days later, to his no small mystification—Jeff Bransford was unmarried. Yet the address was indubitably in Jeff’s handwriting. Taking Leo Ballinger into consul-

tation, he carried it unopened to John Wesley Pringle; taking also a letter for that person, bearing an El Paso postmark many days earlier than the one for the mysterious Mrs. Bransford. Both had lain long in the Escondido office before any one passed going to Rainbow, so the two letters reached there together.

Pringle's letter was brief:

EL PASO, Texas, March 20.

MR. JOHN WESLEY PRINGLE,
Rainbow, N. M.

Dear Sir:

Your friend, Mr. Jeff Bransford, came here some time since on some business with Mr. Simon Hibler—whose clerk I am. Mr. Hibler was on a trip to San Simon, Arizona, and I did not know exactly when he would return. Mr. Bransford decided to wait for him. We became great friends and he rather

made his headquarters with me. He told me a great deal about you.

On the night of March 16th, Mr. Bransford was with me until almost midnight, when he started for his rooms. So far as I can learn he has not been seen or heard of since; his effects are still at his lodgings. He did not take the street car home. I inquired carefully of all the men.

It is now the fourth day since his disappearance and I am much distressed. I have lodged information with the police—but, between you and me, I don't feel any enthusiasm about the police.

If you have any knowledge of his whereabouts I wish you would be so kind as to drop me a line. If you know nothing, I hope that you and the other friends he spoke of so often would come down, and I will put myself at your orders. I am uneasy. As you doubtless know, this is one awful tough town.

Trusting to hear good news at an early date, I remain,

Yours truly,

GEO. T. AUGHINBAUGH.

112 Temple Street.

On reading this John Wesley took it upon himself to open the letter for the non-existent Mrs. Bransford. From that cryptic document they gathered three things only. First, Jeff was under duress; his letter was written to pass inspection by hostile eyes. Second, Leo Ballinger was to visit Uncle Sim and to learn typewriting. Third, George would tell them what to do. There was no George at Rainbow; Leo's only uncle, Simon Hibler, lived in El Paso, his clerk's name was George. The inference was plain.

The next day the three friends presented themselves at 112 Temple Street.

Chapter IX

“And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong.”

SO singular an effect did Mrs. Bransford's letter have upon Mr. George Aughinbaugh that he went red and white by turns, and became incoherent in excited endeavor to say a number of different things at one and the same time; so that Mr. John Wesley Pringle was moved to break off in his reading, to push Mr. Aughinbaugh into a chair, and to administer first aid to the distracted from a leather-covered bottle.

“Take a sip o' this. One swallow will make you simmer,” he said earnestly. “Old Doctor Pringle's Priceless Prescription, a

sovereign remedy for rattlesnake bites, burns, boils, sprains and bruises, fits, freckles and housemaid's sore knee; excellent for chilblains, sunburn, congestion of the currency, inflammation of the ego, corns, verbosity, insomnia, sleeplessness, lying awake and bad dreams, punctuality, fracture of the Decalogue, forgetfulness, painful memory, congenital pip, the pangs of requited affection, mange, vivacity, rush of words to the head, old age and lockjaw.

"I know that Jeff is in one big difficulty, and I see that you understand what his letter means, which is more than I do. Speak up! Say, state and declare what lies heavy on your mind. Tell us about it. If you can't talk make signs."

Neither this speech nor the restorative served wholly to dispel Aughinbaugh's bewilderment. He looked at Mr. Pringle in foggy confusion, holding fast to the panacea,

as if that were the one point on which he was quite clear. Seeing which, Mr. Pringle, somewhat exasperated, renewed his eulogy with increased energy and eloquence "It is also much used in cases of total depravity, contributory negligence, propinquities, clergyman's sore throat, equilateral strangulation and collar galls, veracity, pessimism, Scylla and Charybdis, stuttering, processions of equine oxen and similar phenomena, insubordination, altitude, consanguinity, chalcedony, irritation of the Ephemeridæ, symmetry, vocalization, mammalia, clairvoyance, inertia, acrimony, persecution, paresis, paraphernalia, perspective, perspiration, tyranny, architecture and entire absence of mind—take another dose!" He cast an appealing glance around. "I can't get at what Jeff's trying to say," declared Mr. Pringle with some asperity, "but if I could, I'm damned if I couldn't tell it! Speak up! Play it out on the typewriter."

Acting upon this hint, Aughinbaugh turned to the typewriter and clattered furiously on the keys. He took off two sheets and spread them on the table, face to face, so that one sheet covered all of the other but the first two lines. "There!" he said, pointing. Beebe read aloud:

" 'Now is the time for all good men and true to come to the aid of the party.

A quick move by the enemy will jeopardize six fine gunboats.' "

"He spoke twice—once in each letter," said George Aughinbaugh, "of learning to use the typewriter. He gave a speed sentence that he had made up, containing the entire alphabet. These are similar sentences, used by nearly every one who learns to typewrite. Jeff was familiar with them. He practised the first one by the hour. I gave him the second one the last night he was here. He

is calling on us to come to his help; he is warning us to be careful, that one unconsidered move on our part, 'a quick move,' will be dangerous to him. Taken in connection with the other allusions in his letter, and to things that I know outside of his letter, it probably means that such a quick move might be fatal to him. He is imprisoned—not legally; secretly—and in great danger. Of course, parts of his letter are only padding to introduce and join plausibly the vital allusions so that his captors would allow the letter to go. The allusions are not consecutive. When he speaks of——”

“Hold on, old man; you’re getting all balled up again,” said Pringle. “Suppose, first of all, you tell us, as clearly as you can, exactly what you understand him to mean, just as if he had written it to you direct, without any parables. Then you can explain to us how you got at it, afterwards.”

George walked the room, rearranged his thoughts and, in the process, mastered his agitation.

Finally he faced the three friends and said: "He is in prison, in Juarez, the victim of a conspiracy. He is in utmost danger; he is closely guarded; the persons involved have such powerful reasons for holding him that they would kill him rather than allow him to be rescued. What we do must be done with the greatest caution; his guards must not have the slightest suspicion that a rescue is attempted, or planned, or possible, till it is carried out. In addition to this he tells us that we are to communicate with him by means of the personal columns of the El Paso papers——"

"I got that," said Pringle, "but that is about all I did get. Of course, we all figured it out that we were to come to you for instructions, and that there was something

about a typewriter we wanted to look into. That was plain enough. There, I'm talking with my mouth. Go on!"

"And, in his great danger and distress, he sends you—to Mr. Pringle first, and then to all of you—a last and tenderest farewell, and the strong assurance of his faith that you will do for him all that men can do."

"Good God!" exclaimed Leo. "And was there no hint of who it was that had done this?"

"There was!" said Aughinbaugh, with sparkling eyes. "It was two well-known, wealthy and influential El Paso men—the Honorable S. S. Thorpe and Sam Patterson."

"Show me!" said Pringle—"though I begin to see."

"Half the letter is taken up by comment on the play of Julius Cæsar, which he and I had been reading together," said George. "He tells us plainly, over and over, in differ-

ent words, to look in it for meanings beneath the surface. You remember that? ”

“ Yes,” said Billy.

“ Well, the play hinges upon the conspiracy of Brutus and Cassius—a conspiracy carried out on the Ides of March. Look! ”
He moved the paper to expose another line:

*Remember March, the Ides of March
remember!*

“ Not till then did I remember that the sixteenth of March, the day on which Jeff disappeared, was—not indeed the Ides of March, the fifteenth, but devilish close to it, close enough. So what he says is: ‘ George, remember—think carefully—remember exactly what took place the day you saw me last.’ ”

“ He left my rooms just before midnight. And at midnight exactly, as sworn to by many people, at a spot about a mile from here—

at a spot which Jeff might have reached at just that time—something happened: a street fight in which two men were killed, and the survivor, Captain Charles Tillotson, was wounded. Have you, by any chance, read the evidence in the Tillotson case?”

“Every word of it,” said Billy. “We read the full account of the trial at Escondido yesterday, while we were waiting for the train.”

“Good! Good! That simplifies matters. Think closely—keep in your minds the evidence given at that trial—while I follow Jeff up after he left my door. He must have gone somewhere, you know—and he said he was going home. He usually took the car, but I have already told you that he didn’t that night.

“Now, my rooms are two blocks north of the street-car line; Jeff’s were three blocks south, and a long way up toward town. The

corner of Colorado and Franklin, where the fight took place, was on one of the several routes he might have taken. And, if he had chosen that particular way, he would have reached the scene of the shooting precisely in time to get mixed up in it. I ought, by all means, to have thought of that before, but I didn't—till my wits were sharpened trying to make out Jeff's letter.

“Tillotson, you remember, claims that Krouse shot him without cause or warning; that he, himself, only fired in self-defense; that a fourth man killed Broderick—a fourth man who mysteriously disappeared, as Jeff did.

“Thorpe and Patterson, on the contrary, swore that Tillotson made the attack, not upon Krouse but upon Broderick. Few have ever doubted that evidence, because it was not likely that a man of Broderick's known and deadly quickness could be shot twice

without firing a shot himself, except by a man who took him by surprise.

“But, if Tillotson tells the truth, Thorpe and Patterson lied; and there is a conspiracy for you. And if Tillotson tells the truth, a fourth man did kill Broderick—who more likely than Jeff Bransford, who disappeared, due at that time and place?”

“You mean, possibly due at that time and place,” interrupted Billy. “And how do you account for Jeff’s taking Broderick at a disadvantage? It seems to me you are giving him a poor character.”

“Possibly due at that time and place,” corrected Aughinbaugh, “but certainly disappeared—like Tillotson’s fourth man. As to taking Broderick unawares—wait till you hear Jeff’s story. I can suggest one solution, however—which holds only if there was a conspiracy to murder Tillotson, which, failing, took the turn of hanging him instead.

Assassins in ambush are not entitled to the usual courtesies. If Jeff happened along and observed an ambushade, he would be likely to waive ceremony."

"But Thorpe and Patterson have good characters, haven't they?" asked Pringle.

"Good reputations," said George tartly. "Though it is whispered that Thorpe, as a young man, was habitually careless with fire-arms. But Tillotson also bore an excellent reputation, minus the whispering. It is at least half as probable that two men of good repute should turn perjurers over-night, as that one should. Broderick had a very bad reputation and Krouse had no reputation at all. In fact, that is the only reason a few cling to their belief in Tillotson's innocence. No motive or reason of any kind is assigned for Tillotson's unprovoked attack upon Krouse, as alleged. But the enmity of Thorpe and Tillotson was of common knowl-

edge. It is also rumored that both had been paying marked attention to the same lady. Here are two possible motives for a conspiracy: hatred and jealousy. Of the two dead men, Broderick was a led captain, a bravo, a proven tool for any man who had a handle to him; the other man was unknown."

"The cab driver told the same story," said Pringle. "Was he an enemy of Tillotson?"

"He did," agreed George. "He also ran away. When he came back, the next day, he accounted for himself by saying that he was scared. That sounds queer to me. Timid people may drive cabs, but timid people do not drive cabs in El Paso. The life is too hilarious. But, if he wasn't scared, why did he run away? But again, Jeff Bransford wouldn't get scared——"

"You're all wrong there," said Pringle.

"Me—I've been scared stiff, lots of times. And anyhow—how could any fourth man get away? The neighborhood turned out at once—and they didn't see him."

"Jeff Bransford wouldn't be scared enough to run away, nor you either," amended George. "If you did that, you wouldn't want anybody to believe you under oath. Come back now. How did the fourth man get away, if he was Jeff Bransford and wouldn't run away, no matter what he had done? To figure it out, suppose you knew it was Jeff, but didn't know how he got away—you see? He went in that cab! If the driver was really so timid, why did he ever come back to mix in the trouble of a murder trial? To help hang Tillotson. And his evidence was needed because Thorpe and Patterson were known foes to Tillotson—while he was not.

"If they lied, if the whole thing was a

put-up job, if they carried Jeff off in the cab, probably wounded——”

“It strikes me,” said Leo, “that there are a fatal number of ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’ in your theory. Given a series of four even chances, each of which you are to win, and each of which, to count for you, is contingent upon your winning each of the other three, and your chances are not one in eight but one in two hundred and fifty-six.”

“This is not a game of dice, Mr. Balingier,” retorted Aughinbaugh. “This letter is not the result of chance, but purposed and planned by an unusual man—who had ten days in which to study it out. I have only touched on a few of his significant allusions and stopped to put forward the complete theory based on them all. If you will be patient I will now show you how he unmistakably denounces these men.”

“I’m sorry,” said Billy, “but I have to

acknowledge that I agree with Leo. A theory based upon too many probabilities becomes improbable for that very reason. Too many 'ifs'!"

"There is no 'if' about Jeff's disappearance," rejoined George hotly. "That we know. There is no 'if' about this letter, written in his own hand long after, written to a non-existent wife, in care of Billy Beebe; written under no conceivable conditions and for no conceivable purpose except to convey information under the very eyes of a vigilant jailer; a wanton and senseless folly, that could serve no purpose but to stir us to cruel and useless alarm, if it does not carry to us this information. When two hundred and fifty-six grossly improbable things point each to a common center, the grossness of each separate improbability makes the designed pointing just so much more convincing. You won't let me go on. By Heavens, we are discussing

the laws of evidence and lower mathematics, instead of deciphering this letter!"

"Let Mr. Aughinbaugh be!" said Pringle. "Jeff said, once and again, that George would tell us what to do. We know two very significant truths, and only two: Jeff left Mr. Aughinbaugh's rooms a few minutes before midnight. He should have reached his own rooms just after midnight; he didn't. There are the contradicting events, apparently giving each other the lie; there, and not at another time. If Thorpe and his striker lied—and men do lie, even politicians—Jeff is accounted for. And it is the weakness of a lie that it is no real thing, but an appearance botched upon the very truth. When in doubt, search for the joint. The lie is compressed by hard facts into these few minutes. George is looking in the right place, George knows what to do; go on, George! That will be all from the Great Objectors."

Chapter X

“‘And then he will say to himsel’, The son of Duncan is in the heather and has need of me.”

—*Alan Breck.*

SO George went on: “As Mr. Pringle says, the fact of Jeff’s disappearance at this exact time and possible place strengthened all of the otherwise far-fetched ‘ifs’ twenty-fold. For that reason I stopped any translation of Jeff’s letter, though I had barely begun it, to state in full my theory, or rather my hypothesis, based on the remarkable conjunction of a hinted conspiracy, the occasion and motive of a conspiracy, and what was in all likelihood the consummation of that conspiracy, with both Jeff and Tillotson as victims.

“We will now take up the consideration

of the letter. See if it does not reinforce my hypothesis on every point, until, as block after block falls inevitably into place, ordered and measured, it becomes a demonstration.

“To begin with, the reference to the ‘French Revolution’ is to the paragraph that I finished reading to him a few minutes before he left me, telling of a man secretly and falsely imprisoned in the Bastille by a *lettre de cachet*, a letter of hiding, procured by some powerful personage; a man whose one vain thought and hope and prayer was to have some word of his wife—of his dear wife. And there, I have no doubt, is where Jeff got the idea for this dear, sudden wife of his. Shall I read the paragraph for you?”

He should; and did.

“And from that paragraph—as I told Jeff in the very last words I spoke to him—Dickens got the inspiration for his novel, ‘A

Tale of Two Cities.' What did Jeff say? In effect, that a great writer could find material for a novel from any page. 'A Tale of Two Cities!' And here are the two cities, El Paso and Juarez, side by side—as closely associated as Sodom and Gomorrah, of which, indeed, they remind me at times. Could he, under the circumstances, say any plainer: 'I am in Juarez, in a strong and secret prison'?' "

"That seems likely enough," admitted Leo grudgingly.

"It is plain," said Billy. "It is there; it must mean something; it means that."

"Keep that in mind, then, and consider all the other hints in the light of that admitted message. Weigh them and their probable meaning in connection with this plain warning.

"He speaks of Antony's great oration. He actually quotes two words of it: 'Honorable men!' Therefore, it was important;

he wished to put unusual emphasis on it. Three other important things were called to our attention by being mentioned twice: one vital point, which I will take up later—in fact, the last of all—was distinctly referred to no less than four times. But this is the only direct quotation in the letter.

“Yet of all the words in the play, these two are precisely the two that least need quoting to bring them to remembrance. No one who has read Antony’s speech will ever forget them. Jeff had no need to reiterate here; Antony has done it for him. They were the very heart and blood of it; the master of magic freighted those two words, in their successive differing expression, with praise, uncertainty, doubt, suspicion, invective, certainty, hate, fury, denunciation and revenge. ‘Honorable men!’ And Thorpe, too, is an honorable man! The Honorable S. S. Thorpe! Is that chance?

“More yet! Jeff went out of the way to drag in the wholly superfluous statement that Antony said some things after that which would bear reading. As a literary criticism this is beneath contempt. The words of Antony, as reported by William Shakspeare, would be all that without the seal of his approval. But let us see! He says ‘after’ Cæsar’s funeral oration. Look at the words, Mr. Ballinger. Do you observe anything unusual?”

“I see a blot,” said Leo.

“You see a blot—and you speak of it, unhesitatingly, as unusual. Why? Because Jeff was a man of scrupulous neatness, over-particular, old-maidish. If that blot had been made by accident he would have written the page over again. It was made purposely. And so anxious was he that we should not overlook it, that he has fairly sprinkled the blank half-page below his signature with blots,

trusting that we would then notice and study out the other one. Let us do it. 'After' the funeral oration, he said—but wait. You look, Mr. Beebe; look closely. Do you see anything else there? Pass your finger over it."

"I see and feel where he has twice thrust the pen through the paper," said Billy, changing color. "And I begin to see, and feel, and believe."

"You mean, doubtless, that you begin to believe and tremble," said George spitefully. "Now we will find what Antony says 'after' the oration, so well worth looking into. Gentlemen, the first words Shakspeare puts into Antony's mouth after the funeral scene are these—and remember it is where the Triumvirs are proscribing senators to death, and that Thorpe was formerly a senator, if only a state senator—hear Mark Antony:

“ ‘ These many, then, shall die; their names are prick’d.’ ”

“ Pricked! ” echoed George triumphantly. “ He has denounced them—two of them—the two we know! Thorpe and Patterson. But perhaps that is a gross improbability—a mere coincidence. If anything is lacking to make the denunciation complete, terrible and compelling, it is now supplied. The next words Antony speaks——”

“ Wait a minute,” said Pringle, eying Beebe. “ Let’s see if Billy can carry on your argument. Can you, Billy? ”

Billy put a shaky finger on the blot. His voice was hoarse with passion.

“ ‘ He shall not live; look, with a spot I damn him!’ ”

“ He shall not live,” repeated Pringle, “ this honorable senator—not if

I have to strangle him with my bare hands!"

"I—I suppose you are right," gasped Leo, aghast. "But, suffering saints, he must think we are remarkable men to study out anything so obscure as all that. Why, there isn't one chance in a million for it!"

"Well—so we all are, just that kind of men," said George modestly, "even if some of us are chiefly remarkable for incredulity and—firmness. Obscure? Why, dear man, it had to be obscure! If it hadn't been obscure it would never have been allowed to reach us—I mean, of course, to reach Mrs. Bransford. And yet, in a way, it was neither so obscure nor so remarkable. In the first place, this is not a case of solving puzzles, with a nickel-plated Barlow knife for a prize, or a book for good little girls. This letter means something; it is the urgent call of a friend in need; we are friends indeed, grown-

up men, and it is our business to find out what it means. We have to find out; a man's life is the prize—and more than that, as it turns out. He sent you to me as interpreter, not because he wanted Mr. Pringle to take orders from me, but for the one only reason that it was not obscure to me, and that he knew it would not be obscure to me. Do you notice that I did not have to turn to the play to verify the quotations? It is fresh in my mind and in his: we read it aloud together, we spouted it at each other, we used phrases of it instead of words to carry on ordinary conversation. Mr. Beebe here, when once he was on the right track, could supply the words for the most difficult of all the allusions, though he had probably not read the book for years."

"I ain't never read this Mr. Shakspeare much, myself," said Pringle meditatively. "But oncet—'twas the first time I was ever

in love—I read all that stuff of Tennyson's about King Arthur's 'Ten Knights in a Bar Room,' and I want to tell you that I couldn't even think of anything else for a month. So it seems mighty natural that Jeff, with his head full of this Shakspeare party, would try that particular way of getting word to us, and no other. You spoke of a message for me, Mr. Aughinbaugh?"

"I did. Of a message sent in the knowledge that for all your daring, for all your devotedness, you may not be able to avert the threatened danger. In his desperate pass he sends to you, as if he spoke with you face to face for the last time, the words of Brutus to his friend:

*"Therefore, our everlasting farewell take:
Forever, and forever, farewell, Cassius!
If we do meet again, why, we shall smile;
If not, why then, this parting was well
made.'"*

Silence fell upon them. Pringle went to the window and stood looking out at the night; the clock ticked loudly. Aughinbaugh, keeping his eyes on the blurred typewritten lines, went on:

“And the other message, of hope, and confidence, and trust, is this:

“*‘My heart doth joy that yet, in all my life,
I found no man but he was true to me.’*”

“All of which adds force to his injunction that when the society of good men and true come to his aid, they shall be careful to make no move so quick as to jeopardize Jeff. Q.E.D.”

“Since the majority is plainly against me, and also since I am convinced myself, I’ll give up,” said Ballinger. “And the next thing plainly is, what are we going to do—or who are we going to do?”

Chapter XI

“I will advertise thee what this people shall do.”

—*Balaam.*

“JEFF tells us that too,” said George. “In both letters he speaks of the El Paso papers. In the letter to ‘the kids’ he says that he read every line of one of them. Knowing what we do, it is easy to see that they are brought in to him and that he expects us to communicate with him by means of personals worded for his eye alone. He is looking for them now. As he is so certain of seeing personals, it seems sure that the papers are brought in regularly to him. You know he said his Chief had all the El Paso papers sent on. And since they allow him this indulgence, it is probable and consistent that they do not otherwise ill-treat him. I

suppose they are trying to extort a promise of silence from him under threat of death. But what I don't see is why they didn't kill him right away."

"I understand that well enough," said Pringle. "Jeff has talked 'em out of it! And did he give any hint about what to do?"

"That is the thing I put off till the last," George responded. "It is the most ambiguous of all the allusions. When he twice spoke of Cassius as 'Yond Cassius,' when he mentioned Cæsar's superstitions, and afterward said some of his hunches were pretty good at that, he might have been referring me to either 'Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look' or to the line immediately above: 'Let me have men about me that are fat.' I am reasonably sure that he meant the last. Because he knew that we would get this far—to the big question of what we were going to do about it. We are clear

as to Thorpe's guilt; but that isn't going to help Jeff—or Tillotson.

"Under the circumstances it would have been imprudent for him to give his street and number; they might not have liked it——"

"By Jove!" said Leo, "don't you see? He tells us, in so many words: 'That's all I know.' He didn't know just where he was. It wasn't likely that he would know."

"So he does! I hadn't seen through that at all," said George. "Thank you. That makes it almost a certainty that he meant 'the men about him,' his jailers, were fat. We have to find his jail, and our best chance is to find his jailers. To tell us to look for 'lean and hungry' men in this country of hard-riding, thin, slim, slender, lean, lank, scrawny men, would serve no purpose. But fat men are scarce enough to be noticeable. Besides, Patterson is a mere mountain of flesh;

Thorpe himself is not actually fat, but is dangerously near it. He laid so much stress on this, coming back to it four times, that he must have meant it for a big, plain signpost for our guidance. That settles it. He has men about him that are fat. And we'd better look for them. Mr. Pringle, will you take the lines? "

"The head of the table is wherever Wes' sits down, anyway," remarked Beebe loyally.

"It is moved and seconded that Mr. John Wesley Pringle be elected—er—Sole Electee of the Most Ancient Society of Good Men and True," said Leo. "All in favor will rise or remain seated. Contrary-minded are not members and will kindly leave the room. It is unanimously carried and so ordered. Gentlemen, Mr. Pringle! "

"The Society will come to order," said the Sole Electee severely. "Some good man and true will please state the object of the perma-

nent session and, also, how and why and what he proposes to do first."

"Hadn't we better get some detectives to work," ventured Billy, "and join forces with Tillotson's lawyers?"

"No detectives," said Pringle hastily and decidedly. And "No lawyers," echoed George with equal decision, adding: "Please excuse Mr. Pringle and myself from giving the reasons for our respective vetoes. But they are good ones."

"Then we are to depend on our own resources alone?" demanded Leo.

"Exactly. That's the way the farmer in the second reader got in his wheat. Let us by all means have Fools for Clients and Every Man His Own Detective; that's what makes the guilty quail," said Pringle darkly.

"If we four can't do the trick for love, no man can do it for hire. And there will be no defalcation or failure for fear, favor or

funds or through any fatal half-heartedness. We four friends for our friend unconditionally, without regard for law or the profits, man or devil, death, debt, disgrace or damnation! To the last ditch—and then some!”

Pringle reflected a little. “Gentlemen,” he said, “we will put our little ad. in the papers to-night, at once, *muy pronto* and *immediatamente*. After which I should think a good sleep would be the one first wise move. We will then sally forth, or Sarah forth, in pursuit of knowledge in general, both in El Paso and in Juarez—vulgarly called Whereas—and, more especially, knowledge of Messrs. Thorpe and Patterson and all fat men with whom they do consort. To avoid giving any slightest ground for suspicion—which must be avoided at all hazards—I will disguise myself as a bald-headed, elderly cattleman from Rainbow. Mr. Aughinbaugh——”

"Mister? George, you mean," said that person.

"George, then. George, you will masquerade as a lawyer's clerk. Billy, you'd better buy a haircut and canvas leggings and get yourself up as a reformed Easterner in the act of backsliding. And you, Leo"—he paused and regarded Ballinger doubtfully—"You," he said, and stopped again, with a puzzled frown. The unhappy victim writhed and twisted, thus held up to public scorn and derision as neither fish, flesh, nor herring.

"I have it," said the poor nondescript, with a brave attempt at a smile. "I'll buy some clothes, some booze and a stack of blues—and pass myself off for a Remittance Man."

Pringle heaved a sigh of relief. "I hated to name it to you," he said. "Say, when Jeff first rescued you, exhumed you, resuscitated you, or whatever it was, he told me a little quotation the first time you went out

and left us. His explanation went some like this:

"‘I traced my son through a street of broken windows, and found him dead of old age at five-and-twenty.’"

"So, my boy, it's back to the husks and the hogs for yours. You are assigned to cover the Street of Broken Windows. And that's a pretty big order—in El Paso."

The next morning Jeff found what he had been looking for these many days. In both the *Times* and the *Herald* was an inconspicuous personal in the modest retirement of the advertising section, of obscure wording and small type:

Now is the time for all good men and true to get a cautious move on the trail sit tight coming up.

It was the twenty-fourth day of his imprisonment.

Chapter XII

"No, no! the adventures first: explanations take such a dreadful time."

—*The Gryphon.*

BILLY took up his quarters at the leading hotel and permeated both El Paso and Juarez with much abandon. He wired Cleveland, Ohio, for funds, and Cleveland responded generously, sending him, without delay or demur, a noble wad for the emergency.

George frequented the real-estate section on legitimate, if trivial, pretexts connected with Hibler's business; demanding vacation from that legal luminary on his arrival. Pringle waxed talkative with visiting and resident cowmen, among whom exists a curious freemasonry, informal but highly effective.

Moreover, Pringle disregarded his own explicit instructions. Such cowmen as he knew well—and trusted—began to infest Juarez. Their mere orders—for he gave them no reasons—were to watch either Thorpe or Patterson if they visited the Mexican city; also any obnoxiously fat men with whom they should hold conference; and to report progress.

The four friends between them watched Thorpe in all his doings, dogged his footsteps by night and by day—passed him from one to the other like the button in the game—with such vigilance that at the end of the week they had discovered no single thing to their help.

Thorpe loitered through life in sybaritic fashion; rose late, fared sumptuously; gave a little time to the real-estate office in which he was investing partner; more to political conferences. In the afternoons he rode or

motored; sometimes he dropped in to the Fire Company's bowling alley instead, combating a certain tendency to corpulence.

For the rest there was dinner at his club; bridge with a select coterie, or perhaps the theater; occasionally, a social function. And the day usually ended with a visit to the big Turkish Baths on Franklin Street, another precaution against fatness. Nothing could be more open and aboveboard than this respectable gentleman's walk and auto.

Patterson's doings were much the same, save that he shunned the little entertainments where the Judge shone with a warm and mellow splendor, and ventured often into that quarter of the town that was Leo's particular care, breaking rather more than his full quota of windows. He made also a brief trip to Silver City, on which occasion Pringle again violated his own orders by sending red-headed Joe Cowan, cowboy, of Organ, as an observer

for the G. M. A. T.—to no benefit to the society.

Patterson had gone to look over a mining proposition for a client.

This unavailing search had one curious and unexpected result. Noticing many people closely, perforce, they observed that a surprising number of these had done those things that they really ought not to have done. Also, they kept on doing them; confident that no man saw them: so cunning were they. So that Ballinger gloomily avowed his intention of turning blackmailer, rather than again to appeal to what he was pleased to term the “unremitting kindness” of his family.

Only one thing had occurred so far which the most besotted optimist could interpret as even a possible confirmation of their suspicions.

One night, the fourth of their surveillance, Judge Thorpe took a late street-car for

Juarez, foregoing the baths. When he alighted from it, at Calle San Rafael, John Wesley Pringle also left the car on the farther side and walked smartly away.

Thorpe having turned eastward, Pringle came back and trailed along far behind. He dared not follow closely; if Thorpe's suspicions should be aroused it would go hard with Jeff. He preferred to risk losing his man rather than to risk the consequences of an alarm.

And lose him he did. The Judge turned to the left at Terrazas Street. Pringle was just a little too far behind. He made haste to come up, but when he reached the corner the Judge was out of sight; nor could he catch the trail again. And the Judge returned to El Paso without being seen again.

Of the other labors of the four friends during this weary time; of myriad casual questions that came to naught; of unnum-

bered fat men traced, unsuspecting, to their blameless homes; of hope deferred, disappointments, fastings, vain vigils, and all their acts—behold! are they not written in the book of Lost Endeavor?

Meanwhile Jeff read many books, he practised his typewriting, he baited Mac mercilessly, he experimented with new dishes procured by that trusty henchman; and day by day he noted in the papers little personals: “Understand situation perfectly that quick move will jeopardize”; “Making haste slowly to come to aid of party, whereabouts unknown sit steady”; and others, variously worded to report no progress, to extol the difficult virtue of patience and to recommend its practice—always with a fragment from one of the catchword sentences for an identification tag. One of them gave no news at all. It read: “Pack my box with five dozen

liquor jugs. Practise that for quick movement. Lots of time."

But as John Wesley sagely remarked, "It's a long worm that has no turning." And as he said again, "The end doesn't come till along towards the last."

Chapter XIII

“You’ve been listening at doors—and behind trees—and down chimneys—or you couldn’t have known it!”

—*Humpty-Dumpty.*

AT last, on a happy day, there came to the Judge’s office, demanding and receiving brief audience, a fat man with an indictable face; a man disreputable, vast and unkempt, with a sloven’s shoebrush for beard. Him, so propitiously ill-favored, Aughinbaugh dogged to Leo’s satrapy. There Leo took cognizance of him and, after a window-breaking progress, companied him to Juarez.

Mindful of Pringle’s adventure and mishap with the Judge he took a long chance. Reasoning that, if their theories held good, this man would take the same route the Judge

did, Leo left the car at the first street before San Rafael and followed it eastward till he came to Calle Terrazas. After heartbreaking delay he had the satisfaction of seeing his man turn the corner above and come lurching on his way. Apparently the delay had not been totally unconnected with the wineshops en route.

Leo took refuge in a curio store, buying things he did not in the least want. Emerging with his compulsory parcels, he followed in the wake of the unwieldy leviathan to the International Hotel. Leo entered shortly after him, ordered supper, and went into eclipse behind a paper. The big man took another at the bar, called for his key and stumbled upstairs.

Supper over, Leo loafed aimlessly; and so became involved in many games of pool with a person in a voluble plaid vest—who beat him shamefully. After this hanger-on had

been encouraged a few times, a careless mention of the big man 'on the bat' elicited the information that the big man's name was Borrowman, that he was off his schedule by reason of his hilarity, since he usually did night work—running a stationary engine, the pool shark thought, or something like that—that he was a sulky swine and several other things.

Ballinger lost enough more games and departed to 'phone Aughinbaugh. Not getting him, he next sent urgent summons to Billy Beebe's hotel, the whereabouts of John Wesley being problematical in the extreme. Mr. Beebe was not in; but the clerk would deliver any message when he came. So Leo made an appointment, naming a hostelry in the block adjacent to the International, whither he repaired, engaged a room and kept sharp watch till Billy came.

After consultation, Billy registered at the

International. Borrowman had not seen him before, whereas he might easily remember Ballinger's face and become suspicious. This was no ordinary chase: an alarm meant, in this case, not a mere temporary setback, but irremediable disaster. Leo went to El Paso, left an ad. with the papers, the purport of the same being that the search was "getting warm for enemy of good men and true," and then hunted up Pringle and Aughinbaugh. They returned to Juarez and there separated, to a loitering patrol of the streets east, south and north of the International House.

Billy passed a tedious evening in the office and barroom of the International. At midnight Borrowman had not shown up as expected; it began to look as though his work had gone by the board for that night. But he came down shortly before one, little the worse for his liquor, and set forth at once.

When Borrowman came out he turned east

at the first corner. A little in front of him was a slim and sauntering youth—Aughinbaugh by name—who presently quickened his pace and drew ahead, keeping straight on. Far behind, Beebe brought up the rear, and on the next streets, paralleling the quarry's course, came Pringle on the north and Ballinger on the south, with varying gaits; one or the other waiting at each corner till the chase had crossed between them.

So the pursuit drew on for blocks. Aughinbaugh was far ahead, when, near the town's edge, Borrowman turned to the left again, northward to the river. The chase wheeled with him—Pringle, a block to the north, crossed the street openly and walked briskly ahead; Billy turned riverward on the street west of him; Aughinbaugh brought up the east side, and Ballinger fell in behind.

There was no more doubling. Pringle, in front, saw the river close ahead. The end

must be near; he turned east into a side street and disappeared. Borrowman kept straight on; Ballinger, hidden in a doorway, close behind, saw him enter an adobe house on the river bank. It was a dark and shuttered house; no light appeared from within, but smoke was rising from the chimney.

Ballinger turned back, rounded the block and so foregathered with Aughinbaugh and Pringle. After a long wait Beebe joined them, guided at the last by sundry guarded whistlings; slowly, stealthily, tiptoe, they glided through the rustling shadows to reconnoiter.

The old adobe was flat-roofed and one-storied, as usual. They found chinks in the shuttered windows. No fire was to be seen; the smoke came from an underground room; the hunt was over.

Billy plucked Pringle by the sleeve and bent over, clasping Leo in a fond embrace. After

wordless investigation of this human stairway, by sense of touch, Pringle stepped from Billy's back to Ballinger's broad shoulders, and so wriggled to the roof with noiseless caution.

After an hour-long infinity he reappeared, bulked black and startling against the starlight; descended, led his little flock to the safety of the open *playa* by the river bank and made exultant oration:

"Jeff's there! Having the time of his life! Chimney goes straight down; I could hear every word they said. They're a clever gang of all-round crooks, counterfeitters, smugglers and what-not. Thorpe is the brains. They have a stand-in with some of the police and officials. This cellar was used as a warehouse for storing Chinamen, to be smuggled across in boatload lots. The other man on guard is fat, as we expected, and better looking than Borrowman. He was hopping mad at Borrowman for getting full

and leaving him on guard overtime; threatened him with discipline, gave him a tongue-lashing—Jeff egging him on, enjoying himself very much and urging Borrowman not to stand such abuse. He wouldn't trust Jeff to Borrowman till he was comparatively sober; cussed him again and made him turn in to sleep it off. So of course they'll both be here all night."

"Why, how can you tell that this other man is better looking than Borrowman?" asked George, puzzled. "You couldn't possibly see him."

"Suppose I didn't—I've seen Borrowman, haven't I?" retorted Pringle triumphantly.

"What else did you gather?" asked Billy.

"Well, not much except that we had it all figured out about right. They kept him there at first to make him join 'em. He

wouldn't, and what they are keeping him for instead of wiping him out I don't just see. I'd sure hate to have to keep him. And now, boys, us for El Paso, U. S. A. No more to be done here to-night."

"How are we going to get him out without getting him slightly killed?" demanded George. "I can sit down in an office and study things out, all right—I learned deduction from observing Hibler's methods of settling up estates. But when it comes to violent action I don't know which foot goes first."

"Easiest thing there is," said Pringle. "We'll put him wise by a personal. Tomorrow we'll keep out of sight for a day to give him time to see it. We'll get a hook, a line and a gun, wait till only one man is with Jeff, till Jeff is standing by the fire, and till he gives us the signal we mention in our little ad. Then we let the gun down the

chimney to him and he'll do the rest. Why, it's the only way! There ain't no other way, and couldn't be. Two days more and the jig is strictly up. Let's go home and ~~sleep~~ those two days."

Chapter XIV

"It's a long worm that has no turning."

—J. W. Pringle.

THE tracking of Borrowman had ended on Wednesday in the wee sma' hours. On Friday Jeff found this communication in his morning paper:

*Run to earth hear everything by hot air
now is time for party to aid himself to-night
at nine sharp be at fire signal when ready
by cowboy's lament hold fast all six fine
friends I give you.*

Jeff was pleased. Yet this was the hardest day of his captivity. He made things very unpleasant for Borrowman, who was on guard, his drunk having disarranged the previous schedule. The day dragged slowly

on. Mac came at seven and Borrowman left as soon as supper was cooked.

Jeff had let the fire run low. He stood with his back to it, carrying on an earnest conversation with Mac, who sat on the bed.

“What time is it, Mac?”

“Eight-fifty.”

“Most bedtime,” said Jeff, yawning. “Can’t you manage to stick it out till this time to-morrow night?” he demanded querulously. “That’ll put it back the way it was, so Borrowman’ll be on while I’m asleep. That filthy brute isn’t fit for a gentleman to associate with. Besides, he’ll be letting me get away.”

“He’s all that and worse,” said Mac, grinning toothsomely, “but he’ll na let ye get away. Man, I jalouse he fair aches to kill ye. Ye treat him with much disrespect. Ye’ll na get away from him or me, neither.

We'll hold you here till crack o' doom, if need be."

"Oh, yes, I'll escape sooner or later, of course," said Jeff pleasantly. "And that reminds me—I'll be wanting a hat before long. I wish you'd get me a good one. You didn't fetch mine here, you know. I suppose the barrel of Broderick's gun cut it. Certainly it did. How else could it have cut my head open so? Get a J. B., 7 $\frac{1}{8}$, four-inch brim, pearl gray. It'll supply a long-wanted felt."

"Ye'll need no hat. Man, ye vex me wi' your frantic journeys. Ye canna escape. It is na possible. If ye do, ye may e'en take my hat, for I'll no be needin' it mair."

"Oh, well, I'll not argue with you. It just ruffles you up, without convincing you of your error," said Jeff. "But you're wrong." He turned his face to the fire and lightly hummed the first line of the Cowboy's Lament:

“ ‘ *As I rode down to Latern in Barin——* ’ ”

Immediately the long, blue barrel of a .45 nosed inquiringly down the chimney. Jeff disengaged the gun from the hook and slipped it under his coat. He jerked the line slightly; it was drawn up. Jeff left the fire and sat down, facing Mac across the table.

“ Mac what? ” he demanded. “ We’ve spent a good many pleasant days together, but I don’t know your name till this very yet. Mac what? ”

“ It is no new thing for men of my blood to be nameless,” said Mac composedly. His voice took on a tone of pride; his bearing was not without a certain dignity. “ For generations we were a race proscribit, outlawed, homeless and nameless. The curse of yon wild man Ishmael was ours, and the portion of unblessed Esau—to live by the sword alone, wi’ the dews of heaven for dwelling-

place. Who hasna heard of the Gregara?"

"Oh! So you're a MacGregor? Well, Mr. MacGregor, it is likewise said in that same book that they who take up the sword shall perish by the sword," said Jeff, fondling the gun handle beneath the table. "It seems almost a pity that an exception should be made in your case. For you have your points; I'll not deny it. Of course, you richly deserve to be hung on the same scaffold with Thorpe. But you are so much the more wholesome scoundrel of the two, so straightforward and thoroughgoing in your villainy, that I must admit that I shall feel a certain regret at seeing you make such an unsatisfactory end. Besides, you don't deserve it from me. If Thorpe had listened to you I would never have escaped to hang you both."

"Let me tell you then," said MacGregor with spirit, "that I could hang in no better company. And I shall na stumble on the

gallow-steps. Dinna trouble yourself. If I could hang for him it would be na mair than he has deservit at my hands. He has been staunch wi' me. Wi' wealth and name to lose, he broke me out of San Saba prison wi' his own hands, where else I had been rotting now. But we talk foolishness." He tamped tobacco into his pipe, struck a match and held it over the bowl.

"I assure you that I do not," said Jeff earnestly. "But I'll change the subject. Did you know there was a much shorter sentence with all the letters in it than we've been using? There is. 'Pack my box with five dozen liquor jugs.' It reached me by R. F. D. So did this!"

He rose; the long barrel leaped to level with sinister exultance. "Hold your hands there, Mr. MacGregor—it'll warm your fingers."

The MacGregor held his fingers there,

eying the unwavering blue barrel steadily. He kept his pipe going. Bransford could not withhold his admiration for such surly, indomitable courage. Making a wary circuit to the rear of the defeated warrior, and keeping him covered, he gingerly reached forth to take the MacGregor gun. "Now you can take 'em down. Come on, boys—all clear!" he said, raising his voice.

Sound of running feet from above; the outer door smashed open. Mac flung his hat over to Jeff and sat glowering in wordless rage. Footsteps hurried down the stairs and the passageway. An ax hewed at the door. It crashed in; Pringle, gun in hand, burst through the splintered woodwork; the others pressed behind. John Wesley leaned upon his ax, fumbled at his coat pocket, and extended the famous leather bottle:

"Well, Brutus, old pal, we meet again! Shall we smile?"

Chapter XV

"If the rascal have not given me medicines to make me love him, I'll be hanged."

—*Falstaff*.

"At the envoy's end, I touch!"

—*Cyrano*.

"**N**OW, we must get to work," said Jeff, after hurried mutual explanations.

"The natural impulse is to throw the customs house into the river, to link arms and walk up Main Street, five abreast, pushing the policemen off of the curb, raising our feet high and bringing them down ker-smack—hay-foot, straw-foot, right foot, left: now is the time for all good men—and the rest of it. But, perhaps, it wouldn't be wise. We've got to catch Thorpe off his guard—and that may be hard to do——"

Wes' pulled him down and whispered in his ear. Jeff's face became radiant.

"And after we have him safe we'll get the others. Let's go down to the bank and steal a boat. Boys, this is Mr. MacGregor. We'll take him with us. Mac, you'd better tie a handkerchief around your head. You'll take cold."

"Ye canna take a man from Mexico without extradition papers. It's fair keednap-pin'," said Mac with a leer.

"So we can't, so we can't," said Jeff pleasantly. "Not live men. Go first. If you don't come quietly——"

"Dinna tell me," said the MacGregor scornfully. "Would I no have done as much for you? But let me tell you one thing—and that is that ye are showing small thanks to Thorpe for sparing your life."

"Fudge! I didn't ask him for my life and I owe him no gratitude," said Jeff. "It



THEY PULLED HIM DOWN, FIGHTING SAVAGELY. — Page 166.

was a square contract. I was to hang him if I could escape—and I had practically escaped when he agreed to it, except for the mere detail of time. I am doing nothing unfair. Go on!”

“You’re right, ’twas a contract—I’ll say nae mair,” admitted Mac grudgingly, and went up the stair.

Once on the street, however, he paused. “Mr. Bransford, there have been kindly passages atween us. Let me have a word more.”

“Well?” said Jeff.

The outlaw sat him down on a crumbling wall. “I value your good opeenion, Mr. Bransford, and I would not have ye judge that fear held me from fightin’ ye, drop or no drop. ’Twould have done no good to any one and I should certainly have been killed. Men, ye’ve a grand idee of strategy yourself. I wouldna hae ye think I’m daft

enough to throw away my life to no good purpose. But there the case is verra diff'rent. There are no thick walls now to muffle the noise: ye canna keel me wi'oot muckle deesturbance, bringin' the police on ye. Thorpe has friends here, verra alert folk—and 'gin he gets wind o' any deesturbance at just this place—ye see!" He wagged his head in slow cunning; he drew in a long breath. "*Ho!*" he bellowed. "*Ho! Murder!*"

"Damnation!" said Jeff, and sprang at his throat. The others had his arms: they pulled him down, fighting savagely, turned him over, piled on his back, and gagged him. But it was too late. Two policemen were already running down the street. The neighbors, however, kept prudently within doors.

"Jeff, you and Pringle hike for the U. S. A.," gasped Leo. "Get Thorpe, anyhow. I'll tap this devil dumb, and stay here and stand tne gaff, to give you a start."

“Hold on! Don’t do it,” said Beebe.
“Let me talk to the policemen. Do you tie Mr. MacGregor up.”

“Talk to—why you can’t even speak Spanish!” said Pringle.

“You don’t know me. Watch!” said Billy.

Without waiting for further remonstrance he went to meet the advancing officers. They halted; there was a short colloquy and, to the amazement of the three friends, they turned amicably back together and passed from sight at the next corner.

“Let me make a suggestion,” said Aughinbaugh. “Lug this gentleman back to Jeff’s quarters, tie him up tight, and I think I can undertake to keep him while you get your man. As soon as you have Thorpe, see Tillotson’s lawyers and let them swear out warrants for the arrest of Patterson and the cabdriver, and then take steps to secure

Borrowman and Mr. MacGregor legally. You can have them arrested for kidnapping or illegal detention, and held here until we can get extradition papers. You might send some one—or two, or three—over right away, in case Mr. Borrowman drops in. He might eat me if he found me there alone. For myself, I am not sorry to remain in the background. I have no desire for prominence. You fellows are going back to Rainbow—and you're used to trouble anyway, so it's all very well for you. But I have to stay here and I'm a legal-minded person. This will be a hanging matter for some of 'em before they get done with it. They'll talk like the parrot. I've no desire to make a lot of enemies. There's no knowing how many leading lights may be implicated in this thing when they go to turning state's evidence."

Here he was interrupted by a kick from the gagged prisoner. It was not a vicious

kick and evidently meant only to attract attention. They bent over him. He was shaking his head; in the starlight his eyes blazed denial.

"I didn't mean you," said George, respectfully and apologetically. "I'm sure you wouldn't do such a thing. But Borrowman might, and Patterson will be even more likely to betray the others to save his own neck."

The eyes expressed gloomy agreement. At Pringle's urging, Mac consented to walk back down to the underground room. That wily veteran evidently reserved his stubbornness till there was a chance to accomplish something by it. They were binding him to the bed when Billy rejoined them. "Well! Wherever did you learn Spanish, Billy?" said Pringle curiously.

"It wasn't Spanish—not exactly," said that accomplished linguist modestly. "It

was a sort of Esperanto. I met them with a cocked revolver in one hand and a roll of bills in the other. They took the bills."

Jeff's sprightly spirits were somewhat dampened. "Whoever would have looked for such stubborn loyalty from this battered old rascal?" he demanded, sighing. "Even Thorpe is not altogether to be despised—or pitied. He had a friend. By Heavens, Mac! I'll take every precaution to hold fast to you—but I find it in my heart to hope you get away in spite of me." He bent over and met the dauntless eyes; he laid his fingers on Mac's hair, almost tenderly. "I'll tell him, old man," he whispered.

He turned away, but after a step or two paused and looked back with an irresolution foreign to his character. He finally came back and sat on the edge of the bed, with his back to the MacGregor. He squeezed

his hands between his knees, idly clicking his heels together. His eyes were intent on a crack in the floor: he recited in a dull monotone:

“‘And often after sunset, sir,
When it is bright and fair,
I take my little derringer
And eat my supper there!’”

The others waited by the door. John Wesley posted George with a sedate and knowing wink. George eyed these movements of Jeff's with grave disapproval.

“How often have I heard you denounce precisely such proceedings as these, as the fatal vice of Hamleting!” he jeered. “Flip up a dollar! Or are you going to favor us with a soliloquy?”

Jeff raised his eyes. “I was just trying to remember an old story,” he explained innocently. “My grandfather was a Hudson

Bay man, and this story was a John Company tradition when he was a boy. It's about two canny Scots. That's what put me in mind of it, Mac being a Scotchman—and in trouble.

“Their names were Kerr and McKensie. One day Kerr upset his canoe in some rapids and lost everything he had but his clothes and his sheath-knife. But at dark he happened on McKensie's camp, and stayed the night with him. McKensie had a good outfit—canoe, rifle, grub, traps, and a big bundle of furs. He had also a deserved reputation for shrewdness and thrift. And in the night they got to trading.

“When morning came McKensie had the sheath-knife and Kerr had everything else. McKensie would never explain what happened. When asked about it he looked a little dazed. He said, with marked emphasis:

“‘Yon is a verra intelligent pairson!’

The moral is, You've got to be careful with a Scotchman."

"You get out!" said George indignantly. "Go gather the Judge. I'll 'tend to Mac."

"All right," said Jeff. "We'll go. But don't say I didn't warn you."

.

Judge Thorpe was particularly well pleased with himself. After a prosperous and profitable day and a pleasant evening at his club, he bethought himself of his old relentless enemy, obesity, and made his way to the Turkish baths.

He had been boiled, baked and basted, and now lay swathed in linen on a marble slab, blissfully drowsy, waiting to be curried. He was more than half asleep when the operator came.

When the currying process began, however, the Judge noticed that the hostler seemed anything but an expert. Why had

they not sent Gibbons as usual? He opened his eyes, intending remonstrance, but closed them immediately; they were playing tricks on him. A curious thing! The white-tunicked attendant, seen through the curling spirals of steam, looked startlingly like his prisoner in Juarez. The Judge's heart skipped a beat or two and then started with a fearful thumping.

The rubber plied his mitten briskly; the Judge opened his eyes again. Of course the prisoner was safe; the illusion was doubtless the effect of the perspiration on his eyelashes. The billowy vapor parted, the industrious attendant bent impersonally over him with a serene, benevolent look—Good Heavens!

The Judge's heart died horribly within him, his tongue was dry, his bones turned to water and his flesh to a quivering jelly. He cast a beseeching look to the open door. Beyond

it, looking idly in, were three men in street clothes. They entered, ranging themselves silently against the wall. They looked amused. Thorpe's lips moved, but no words came.

Jeff Bransford rubbed away assiduously; there was a quizzical glint in his pleasant brown eyes. "My wife, Judge," he said cheerfully, jerking his head to introduce Beebe, "and my two boys, Wes' and Leo. Fine, well-grown boys, aren't they?" He prodded the Judge's ribs with a jocular thumb. "Say, Judge—how about that pre-sentiment now?"

.

After personally attending the Judge and Patterson to jail, the G. M. A. T. felt that the capture of minor offenders might safely be left to the government. So they routed out Tillotson's lawyers at the unseemly hour of 4 A.M., broke the news gently, and haled

them off to jail for consultation with Tillotson.

Congratulation and explanation was over: the cumbrous machinery of the law was fairly under way (creakingly, despite liberal oiling), and a gorgeous breakfast for all hands was being brought into the jail from a nearby restaurant, when the jailer ushered Aughinbaugh into the presence of the friends in council.

He sauntered in with the most insouciant and complacent air imaginable. El Paso's best cigar was perked up at a jaunty angle from the corner of his mouth; it was plain he was particularly well pleased with himself.

"Hello! where's your prisoner?" said the firm in chorus.

Aughinbaugh removed the cigar and flicked the ash. "Mac? He got away," he said indifferently.

“Got away!” shrieked the senior lawyer.
“Gagged, bound hand and foot, tied to the bed—and got away!”

Aughinbaugh surveyed him placidly, and waved his cigar in graceful explanation.

“Yon was a verra intelligent pairson!” said he.

THE END

HIT THE LINE HARD

HIT THE LINE HARD

Chapter I

NEIGHBOR JONES gazed meditatively from his room in the Saragossa House: an unwelcome guest buzzed empty boastings in his ear. He saw, between narrowed lids, the dazzle of bright tracks, the Saragossa Station, the bright green of irrigated fields beyond, merged to a vague and half-sensed background. The object of his attentive consideration was nearer at hand, by the west-most track—a long, squat warehouse, battered and dingy red. And from this shabby beginning, while the bore droned endlessly on, Neighbor Jones wove romance for his private delight.

The warehouse was decked all about by a wide, high platform. A low-pitched roof reached far out beyond the building to overhang this platform, so that the whole bore a singular resemblance to Noah's Ark of happy memory. A forlorn and forgotten ark: the warped shingles, the peeling, blistered paint, the frayed and splintered planks, were eloquent of past prosperity and of change, neglect and decay.

The gable end was crowded with huge lettering of whitish gray. When those gray letters were white the sign had read:

BROWN, ALMANDARES & COMPANY

GENERAL MERCHANDISE

BEST PRICES

FOR WOOL AND HIDES

Long ago the firm name had been painted out; but the old letters broke dim and ghostly through, persisted stubborn under the

paint that would blot them, hid and haunted beyond the letters of a later name:

MARTIN BENNETT

Bennett had been the Company.

Neighbor Jones sprawled largely in his tilted chair, smoking with vast and enviable enjoyment. One hand was pocketed. The other, big, strong, blunt-fingered, tapped on the window sill a brave tattoo of ringing hoofs—no finicky, mimimy tanbark trot, but steady and measured, a great horse breasting the wind and the rain. To this strong cadence Neighbor Jones trolled a merry stave from the amazing ballad of the Chisholm Trail:

*“Foot in the saddle and a hand on the horn;
Best old cowboy ever was born.*

Hi, yi—yi—yippy, yippy hi—yi—yi!

Hi—yi—yi — yippy — yippy — yea! —

In the lines of the long taper from broad shoulders to booted feet; in the massive broad-browed head; the tawny hair; the square, ruddy-brown face; the narrowed sleepy eyes—in every mold and motion of the man, balanced and poised, there was something lionlike; something one might do well to remark.

But his one companion, the Kansas City Kid, remarked none of those things. The Kansas City Kid was otherwise engrossed—with his own cleverness.

“Oh, I’ll show you, all right! There’s one born every minute,” said the K. C. Kid crisply. “How many hands? Five? Five is right. Second hand for Jones; first hand is the winner. Watch me close!”

He shuffled the cards with a brisk and careless swing, cutting them once, twice, thrice, with flourish and slap; shuffled again,

with a smooth ripple pleasant to the ear, and shoved the deck across for a final cut.

"See anything wrong? No? Here we go! Watch!" He dealt five poker hands, face down. "Now then, look! You've got three tens and a pair of trays. First hand has jacks up, opens, stands a raise from you, draws one black jack." Illustrating, the Kid flipped the top card from the deck. It was the spade jack. "Then you bet your fool head off. He should worry. And that's the way they trimmed you—see?"

Neighbor Jones blinked a little and twisted his tawny-gold hair to a peak, retaining unshaded and unchanged his look of sleepy good nature.

"Smooth work!" he said approvingly.

"You're dead right, it's smooth work!" asserted the gratified artist. "Some class to that! Them guys that got yours couldn't do any such work—they was raw! I'm showing

you what I got, so you can figure out the surprise party you and me can hand to 'em—see? Say, they pulled a lot of stunts the Old Ladies' Home is wise to back in my town—strippers, short cards, holdouts, cold decks—old stuff! Honest, they make me sick! I can steal the gold out of their teeth and they'll never miss it!"

Jones looked at the man with wonder and pity. The poor wretch was proud of his sorry accomplishment, displayed it with pleasure, thought himself envied for it. By this shameful skill he had come so far, in the pride and heyday of youth—to such dire shifts, such ebbs and shallows; to empty days, joyless, friendless, without hope of any better morrow. No dupe he had gulled but might grieve for him, cut off, clean aside from all purpose or meaning of life.

"Well?" said the Kid impatiently.

The contemplative gentleman roused himself.

"Someway I don't like this idea of being cheated pretty well." His voice was a mild and regretful drawl. "Never had much use for Beck; but I did think old Scanlon was a square old sport!"

"Square sport! Why, you poor simp, you never had a look in!" sneered the sharper. Then he wrinkled his brows in some perplexity. "What I don't see is why they didn't skin the Eastern chap too. They could 'a' had that gink's wad—that Drake; but they let him down easy. Oh, well, we should worry! It will leave all the more for us."

"For us?" echoed Neighbor, puzzled.

"Sure, Mike! You get hold of a good piece of money and we'll do a brother act. You and me, we ain't never been chummy—they won't tumble. We'll sit in with 'em and string along with 'em till the big money gets

out in the open—just holding enough cards to keep in the swim. When I give you the office, go get 'em! I'll slip big ones to Beck and the college Johnny—and the top hand to you, of course—and we'll split fifty-fifty."

Neighbor's mind groped back along the dusty years for a half-forgotten adage.

"If a dog bites you once," he said with halting speech, "shame on him; if you bite a dog—shame on you!"

"Huh? I don't get you."

"Besides," said Neighbor placidly, "you'll be going away now."

"Not me. Saragossa looks good to me."

"You'll be going away," repeated Neighbor patiently, "on the next train—any direction—and never coming back!"

"What?" The Kid jumped up, blazing wrath. "Why, you cheap skate—you quitter! Are you goin' to throw me down? You come-on! You piker——"

"Boob?" suggested Neighbor kindly.

"Mutt? Sucker?"

"You hick! You yellow hound——"

"Sit down," advised Neighbor quietly.

"You ought to lose your money! For ten cents——"

"Sit down," said Neighbor more quietly. The pocketed hand produced a dime and slid it across the table. "Go on with that ten-cent job you had on your mind, whatever it was," said Neighbor. "There's the money. Pick it up!"

Weight and inches, the two men evened up fairly well. Also, the ivory butt of a forty-four peeped from the Kid's waistband. But Neighbor's eye was convincing; here was a man who meant the thing he said. The younger man shifted his own eyes uneasily, checked, faltered and sat down.

"Pick up your dime!" said Neighbor. The Kid complied with a mumbling in his throat.

"That's right," said Jones. "Now, don't you be too proud to take advice from a yellow hound. First, don't you bother your poor head about me losing my money. My money don't cost me anything," he explained—"I work for it. Next, about Beck—I'll sleep on this matter and look it over from all sides. No hurry. If I'm not just pleased with Beck for cheating me I'll adjust the matter with him—but I'll not cheat him. I never try to beat a man at his own game. Toddle along, now. I hear a train coming. By-by!"

"It's the freight. I'll go on the five-o'clock passenger—not before."

"Oh, yes you will!" said Jones confidently. "You've only accused Beck of cheating, but you've proved it on yourself. The boys won't like it. It is best to leave me thus, dear—best for you and best for me." His eyes wandered to the window and rested calculatingly on the Fowler cottonwood across the

street. It was a historic tree; Joel Fowler had been hanged thereon by disapproving friends.

The Kid caught the glance and the unspoken allusion; sweat beaded his forehead.

"Aw, lemme wait for the passenger!" he protested. "I gotta go up to the Windsor to pay what I owe and get my suit case."

Neighbor rose.

"There, there! Don't you fret," he said, patting the other man's shoulder kindly. "Give me the money. I'll pay your bill and keep the suit case. You just run along."

"Good lord, man! Those clothes cost me——"

"Now, now! Never mind—that's all right—everything's all right!" said Neighbor soothingly. "We're just about of a size." He nudged the Kid's ribs with a confidential elbow. "Sly old dog! You had some of my money too, didn't you? Yes; and I'll keep

that cunning little gun of yours as a souvenir." The last remark came after—not before—Neighbor's acquisition of the cunning little gun. "Come on, my boy, we'll mosey along over to the station. Here's our hats, on the bed."

He linked his arm with the victim's: he sang with a joyous and martial note:

*"Hark! From the tombs a doleful sound;
Maryland, my Maryland!
My love lies buried underground;
Maryland, my Maryland!"*

Chapter II

IT was nearing two P. M. when Mr. Jones, after speeding the parting Kid, made his way uptown. Upstairs was the word in his thought. Saragossa is built that way. Let Saragossa Mountain, close and great and golden, stand for the house; the town will then be the front steps. The first step is Venice, in the lush green of the valley—railroad buildings, coal chute, ferryman, warehouses, two nth-class hotels, and a few farmhouses, all on stilts, being a few feet above the Rio Grande at low water and a few feet under it at high water. Whence the name, Venice.

On the first rising ground to the westward is the business quarter, as close to the railroad

as safety permits. A step up comes to a sheltered, sunny terrace and to the Old Town—the Mexican village dating back to before the great uprising of 1680. Another, a steep and high step, rose to the residence section, on a strip of yellow mesa; for Saragossa has water piped from the high hills, so please you, and is not confined to the lowlands, like most of her New Mexican sisters. Still above, on the fifth and last step, smelter and mining town clung to a yellow-brown slope reached by a spur of railroad looping in a long bow-knot from the valley below.

Above all, sheer and steep, circling about, sheltering, brooding, hung Saragossa Mountain, rose and gold in mid-day or morning sun; blue and rose-edged when the long shadows thrust eastward stealthily, steadily—crept like kittens at play, or like them fell off, down those old, old steps.

Something of all this Neighbor saw and

put into thoughts—not into words. Saw, too, all beyond and all about, the vast and sun-drenched land of all colors and all shapes—valley and plain and mesa, shelf and slope and curve, and bend and broken ridge and hill; great ranges against the turquoise sky, near or far, or far beyond belief, saw-toothed or wall-straight or rounded—every one precisely unlike any other visible mountain or any other possible mountain. By this cause his step was sprightly and glad, his eye bright, his chin well up—a very sincere way of thanking God.

Now, as he swung along the street, he voiced these thoughts in a little hymn of praise. At least it sounded like a hymn of praise as he sang it to a healthy and manful tune; resonant, ringing, reverberant:

*“Plunged in a gulf of dark despair—
Maryland, my Maryland!”*

On three sides of the shaded plaza business was housed in modern comfort. In sharp contrast, all along the north, sprawled an unbroken, staring huddle of haphazard buildings—frame, brick and adobe, tall and squat jumbled together, broad fronted or pinched. At the riverward corner, massive, ill-kept but dominant still, was a great structure of gray-stone once the luckless home of Brown and Almandares.

Squalid, faded and time-stained, like Falstaff's rabble of recruits, this long row struck sinister to the eye. Any stranger, seeing what blight had fallen ominous and threatening all about him, seeing on door after door the same repeated name, might well guess the whole ugly story. For this long, forlorn row housed Bennett's General Stores. Bennett sold everything but tunnels.

Here was Neighbor's nearest errand.

After a little delay he was shown into the great man's private office.

Bennett turned slowly in his revolving chair; a tall spare man, with a thin straggle of sandy hair and a sharp, narrow face, close-shaven; which might have been a pleasant face but for a pinched and cruel mouth, a mean, pinched nose, and a shifty eye.

Here arose a curious contradiction. The man had held the whip hand for years, his conscious manner was overbearing and arrogant, but his eyes betrayed him, and all the unconscious lines of his face were slinking and furtive. He now wore an austere frown.

"Mr. Jones, I hear you have been gambling."

"Oh, *si!*" said Mr. Jones; and he made those simple words convey enthusiasm, brightness and joy. "And—but, also, what do you suppose I hear about you? Give you three guesses."

"What!" Bennett gasped incredulously; he crashed his fist down on the desk. "How about that mortgage?"

Jones beamed triumphant.

"You see? You don't like it yourself—meddlin', pryin' and loose talk."

"I'll fix you! This'll be the worst day's work you ever did—trying to get smart with me!"

"Percival Pulcifer, will you kindly retain your rompers?" said Neighbor with eminent cheerfulness. "Now hark and heed! You did not ask me to sit down. You are not a nice old man. I do not like you much. Don't you touch that bell! . . . I shall now sit down. Smoke? No? Well, I'll roll one."

Rolling one with tender care, Neighbor cocked a pleasant but rather impish eye on the seething financier and blithely prattled on:

"Allow me to say, Mr. Banker, that you

are overlooking one point: You have a mortgage on my cattle, but you haven't got any mortgage on me. Got that—clear?"

The banker gurgled, black faced and choking.

"I'll ruin you! I'll smash you!"

"Percival Pulcifer Peterkin Pool!"

For some reason, not at first easily apparent, these harmless words, which Jones syllabled with great firmness, made the banker writhe. He was wonted to hate—but ridicule was new to him and it hurt.

"You might at least show some respect for my gray hairs," he interrupted indignantly.

"Oh, dye your gray hairs!" said Neighbor simply. "Damn your old gray hairs! Shoot, if you must, that old gray head! You're an old gray-headed scoundrel—that's what you are!"

"Of course," observed the gray-haired one,

gathering himself together, "you will be ready with the money on the nail?"

"Now you're talking sense!" cried Neighbor warmly. "Now you're getting down to facts." He threw back his head and sang with great heartiness and zest:

*"That day of wrath, that dreadful day;
Maryland, my Maryland!
When heaven and earth shall pass away;
Maryland, my Maryland!"*

Clerks beyond the glass partition turned startled faces that way. In that gloomy, haunted counting room, used only to the tones of meekness or despair, the echoes rolled thunderous:

*"When, shriveling like a parchèd scroll,
The flaming heavens together roll——"*

"Will I have the money? *Quien sabe?* If I don't the brand is yours—party of the first part, his heirs, executors and assigns forever

—nary a whimper from this corner. If I knew for certain I'd tell you, for you have a plain right to know that; but that first line of talk was just sickening drivel. If you held a mortgage on a man's stuff, would that give you any right to go snoopin' round and compel him to get in a poker game—hey? Would that look nice? Whaddy you mean, then—how dast you, then—try to tell me not to play poker—meddling in my private affairs? How dare you? Shame-y! Shame-y! S-s-h!"

"Jones," said the other thickly, "I think the devil himself is in you to-day. You poor, headstrong fool! I sent for you to do you a kindness."

Jones rose anxiously.

"Shall I call a doctor?"

"Well, I did; but you make it hard for me."

"Yes, yes! And you not used to doing

kind things, either!" said Jones sympathetically. "Go on. We're all with you. Give it a name."

Bennett paced up and down, clasping his hands behind his back.

"You know I have a cattle ranch out Luna way? Ever been there?"

"Not any. I stick to the east side. Saragossa is my furthest west; and, as you know, I've never been here before. But don't let me interrupt. You were working yourself up to a kindness."

Bennett flinched at his careless contempt, but he forced himself to go on.

"I was intending to offer you a job as my foreman."

Neighbor sat down with an air of relief.

"You don't need no doctor. It's yourself you're trying to be kind to. Go on with your talk. For a starter—what would I do with my own cattle?"

"Sell, get a friend to run them; let them out on shares. You wouldn't need to worry about the mortgage. It could stand over—you'll be getting good money. And," said the financier diffidently, spacing the words and dropping his voice to tones singularly flat and even, "if—everything—went—all—right, the—mortgage—might—be—canceled."

"Yes? How jolly! But what's the matter with the west-side cowmen? Can't you get some of the V T waddies? Should think you'd rather use home talent."

Bennett resumed his measured pacing. At the end of each beat he turned, always away from Neighbor's eyes, so that he marked out a distinct figure eight. Other men, unhappy debtors, had walked that narrow space, many of them; perhaps none so fiend-ridden as he who now tracked back and forth. The jeers of this uncringing debtor

galled him to the quick, yet his purpose drove him on.

"We have been having a little trouble on the ranch. For many reasons I do not think it wise to get a local man." He coughed gently, and went on in the same low and listless manner of speech he had used in his hint about the mortgage. "Trouble was between my boys and the Quinliven outfit—the Double Dee—about one of my watering places. I have no legal title, but the spring is mine by all the customs of the country. There was some shooting, I believe. No one was hurt, fortunately, but there is hard feeling. I must put a stop to it. For his part in the deplorable affair I let my foreman go—Tom Garst. Know him?"

"Sure!"

"So I thought I would get you for the place."

"Me being a notorious peacemaker and

cheekturner, suffering long, and kind, not easily provoked—yes, yes!”

“Quinliven himself would be willing to let the matter drop, I think; but young Roger Drake—why, you know young Drake—he was one of your poker party!”

“The college lad—yes.”

“Nephew of Old Drake, Quinliven’s partner, who died a month or two ago,” continued Bennett, sedulously avoiding Neighbor’s eye. “Young Drake is hot-headed; says he’s going to hold that spring anyhow. He — will — require — careful—handling.” Again that slow, significant spacing of the words.

As lifelessly Neighbor answered:

“And—if—I—handle—him — carefully; if—everything—turns—out—all—right, the —mortgage—will—be—canceled?”

“Yes,” said Bennett. He busied himself at his desk.

In a startled silence Neighbor rose, fold after fold, interminable and slow. He fumbled for matches, pipe and tobacco; thoughtfully, thoroughly, he constructed a smoke. Then he raised his eyes. Many a hard Ulysses-year had passed over him, this old Neighbor; but his eyes were clear and unstained yet. They now observed Mr. Bennett attentively.

"Sorry," said Neighbor Jones. "I haven't got a thing fit to wear."

At the door he turned. "Now, I'll tell you what you do," he said kindly. He spread out his left hand and drew a diagram down the palm: "You go to hell and take the first turn to the left!"

Chapter III

DUCKY DRAKE — Roger Olcott Drake, Second—dawdled over a four-o'clock breakfast. He was in bathrobe and slippers, his feet on a second chair; the morning paper was propped before him and the low western sun peeped through his windows.

The room phone rang. "Hel-lo-o! Gentleman to see Mr. Drake—shall we show him up?" . . . "Use your own judgment; the last time I tried to show a man up he worked my face over." Bring him up, the telephone meant. Mr. Drake desired particulars: "What is the gentleman's silly name?" . . . "Jones. Cowpunch; six or seven feet up; incredibly sober." . . . "Sure, Moike! Bring him along! Say, send some

good smokes, will you?—and some swipes. What's that? What do I mean, swipes? Beer, you idiot—beer!"

A clear eye, bright and black; a clean, fresh-colored skin; a frank and pleasant face—that was Ducky. He met his visitor at the door.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Neighbor—welcome to our well-known midst! Weather! Chair! How's every little thing? You look chirpy enough. Shan't I have breakfast sent up for you?"

"No, thank you; I got up at noon. You can give me a little help though."

"Put it on the table, George. That's all." George, known in private life as Gregorio, departed, and Ducky turned to his guest. "Whaddy you mean—help?" he demanded, grinning sympathetically. "Did they put the kibosh on you good and proper after I quit last night?" He pushed the ci-

gars over and began operations with a corkscrew.

"Oh, no—nothing like that. I want some advice."

"Advice? This is the right shop." Roger struck a Pecksniff pose, waved the corkscrew aloft, and declaimed grandly: "Put your eggs in one basket. Get on the wagon. Hitch your wagon to a star. Mind your step! When in doubt, play trumps. Be sure you're ahead and then go right home."

"Not advice exactly—information."

"Oh!" said Ducky. "A straight line is the shortest distance between two points; the woman who hesitations is lost; a Cobb in the club is worth two in the bush; lead-pencil signatures are good in law; a receiver is as bad as a promoter; hospitality is the thief of time; absinthe makes the heart grow fonder."

Neighbor shoved a bottle of beer into his host's hand.

"Drink, pretty creature, drink! Let me explain: What I want is to ask some questions—about words, and so on. You're a college Johnny, ain't you?"

"Booze Arts, Harvard," said Ducky. "Not graduated yet."

"Man staying here in the Windsor with you—was staying here, gone now—used a lot of words I don't quite savvy." Neighbor leaned forward, blinking earnestly. "What is the precise distinction between a mutt, a simp, a gink and a boob? And what did he mean by saying all the time, 'I should worry!'"

Ducky placed the tips of his fingers accurately together, and held his head on one side, birdwise, pursing his lips precisely.

"The phrase I should worry is derived from the Hebrew verb to bibble, meaning to worry—I should bibble; you should bibble; he or she should bibble. Plural: we should

bibble; ye should bibble; they should bibble.

"Mutt, simp, gink and boob are scientific terms employed rather indiscriminately by philosophers of an idealistic tendency. Broadly speaking, the words denote one whose speech, manner, education, habits or clothes differ in any respect from your own; categorically, a thinker whose opinions and ideals do not correspond in every particular with your own. Exactly equivalent terms are—in religion, heretic or infidel; in politics, demagogue, blatherskite!"

"Thank you," said Neighbor humbly. "Myself, I understood him to mean almost the same thing as a sucker; because this fellow—it was the K. C. Kid, that sat on your left—he spoke of you and me being mutts and simps, and all them things; and at the same time he said we'd been swindled, cheated or skinned in that little poker game."

Ducky made a passionate comment.

"That alley-goat could sure stack the cards. He showed me that," said Neighbor, and related the painful story of the K. C. Kid's flitting.

"We are the victims of the highly accomplished fact," said Roger. "We can't very well squeal; but can they do this to us with the well-known impunity?"

"No," said Neighbor; "they cannot. I'll make a note of it. We'll not squeal and we'll not cheat; but we'll give 'em their come-uppances someway. I do not, as a general thing, hold myself up for the admiration of the good and wise; but I must say that I've always got what I went after if I wanted it hard enough."

"'Don't flinch; don't foul; hit the line hard!'" said Roger. The words snapped like a lash.

"Who said that? He did? Good for him once! And I want this, hard. When I

get my auger in I'll give it another twist for you, Mr. Ducky, in case you are not here. You haven't lost much anyhow. That's funny too! Huh! Our tinhorn friend noticed that. Seems like they didn't want to rob you; and yet your wool was enough sight longer'n mine. I don't get the idea. I like to understand things as I go along."

"I won away quite a wad, all right; but you might say I wasn't a loser at all compared to what I was two or three nights ago. I was certain-lee in bad!" Ducky performed a hospitable rite. "Well, we'll have to give up poker at Beck's. Here's how!"

"That brings me up to the main point," said Neighbor casually. "What have you been and gone and done? Because a gentleman just offered me the highest market price for your scalp."

"What?"

"He wanted me to abate you—to abolish

you—to beef you—to murder you! Don't be so dumb! So I thought I'd drop in and get your views."

"What's the joke?"

"It's no joke. This *hombre* sure wants you killed off. You'll save time by taking that for proved. And," said Neighbor wistfully, "I needed the money too."

"But who—who——"

"Not at all," said Jones. "Why—why? You tell me why, why, first, and see how well it fits in with who, who. I know the answer all right but I haven't heard the riddle yet."

"Oi, yoi, yoi!" Young Drake sat up with a sudden alertness and stared hard at his visitor. "It's Uncle Ducky's money—that's why—I'll bet a cooky!"

"Not with me, you won't," said Neighbor; "for if your Uncle Ducky left any worldly goods the gentleman that offers a bounty for you is the very man to covet those goods."

Just how getting you killed would bring him in anything I don't almost see."

"That's just it!" cried Roger Drake. "He's got the money now—or somebody has; I haven't. I'm trying to find it."

"Son," said Neighbor judicially, "this sounds real thrillin'. Tell it to me."

Young Drake hesitated.

"No offense, Mr. Jones; but I have been strongly advised to say nothing."

Neighbor nodded eagerly.

"Yes, yes! Mystery; sorcery; silence; wisdom! 'But how do you know I'm honest?' says the lad in the story. 'Why,' says the other chap, 'didn't you just tell me so?' Well, I'm honest. Go on! Also curious. That's why I want to be told; but here is why you should want to tell me: If we were back in New York town you'd understand the ins and outs of things that I couldn't make a guess at, and that it would take you

large, dreary centuries to tell me about. Ever think of that?"

"I gotcha!" said Roger joyously. "And this is your country, you mean; while I'm a mere stranger——"

"Correct! Move up one girl! I never saw a merer stranger than you, Mr. Ducky. You're so mere that none know you but to love you. Why, the boys you've met up with out on the range couldn't even be hired to kill you, and they had to offer me the chance. Durned if I believe I'm going to do it myself! G'wan now; let's hear the sad story of your life."

Chapter IV

WHEN I think of that poor little answer waiting all alone for its own dear riddle," said Ducky, much affected, "I can't refuse. But I'll only hit the high places. Uncle Roger is dead, and it isn't a pleasant stunt to rake up all his faults and catalogue 'em."

He reflected a little while.

"My uncle put me through college and named me as his sole heir, for the reason—I had it from his own lips—that he lost father's little property for him. Uncle Roger was the elder brother, head of the family, and all that.

"He had a mighty high idea of the Drakes, did Uncle Roger, and he never liked my mother. To the day of her death he was

barely civil to her. That's what I couldn't forgive in him, for all his cold and formal kindness to me. Damn it! He ignored her and she was worth a hundred like Roger Drake.

"From all accounts, my Uncle Roger was a warm baby at college. He was the only original Ducky Drake; all others were base imitations. Come back to li'l' ol' N' York—lawyer; man about town; clubs; Tottie Twinkletoes; birds and bottles at proper temperatures! New York took his roll away from him.

"Did he buckle down to business and, by frugal industry—and so on? He did not. He faded away into the dim blue and the tall green. Honest, Jonesy, this is rotten of me—knockin' like this! But if you're going to help me play Money, money, who's got Uncle Ducky's money? this is what you want to know. It was the keynote of his character

that he wanted all the beastly junk money will buy, but wasn't willing to hop out and hustle for the money. He wanted it quick, easy and often."

"Mind if I take notes?"

"'Eavings, no! Well, six years afterward he came back. A distant relative—great-aunt or something—had left him a sizable legacy. Business of killing calf. So he took his money and poor old dad's and set to work to found an estate. Mother didn't know about it. I happened along about that time and she took quite a fancy to me; didn't notice other things.

"It doesn't seem possible that anyone could consistently lose money in real estate in a thrifty, growing burg like New York, does it? Uncle Roger did. Then he ducked again.

"Some ten years later, back to New York—who comes here? Is it my long-lost uncle?

It is. Talked vaguely of holdings in New Mexico. Had the mazuma, and spent it. He stayed all winter; then back to New Mex. That's been the program ever since—four to six months in New York, the rest out here. But he didn't talk about New Mexico and he didn't urge us to visit him there.

"To do him justice, he made good on one point. He came through with good hard coin for dad. He was really very fond of poor old dad, and he'd always been sore at himself about losing dad's wad. And, as I said, he put his ungrateful nephew through school.

"Two months ago we found him dead in his bed—heart disease. His will left all his property to me unconditionally. But where and what was his property? He hadn't told us; and naturally dad hadn't felt like asking him.

"Saragossa was his post office. Except a pass book for his New York bank we found no papers in his effects—not so much as a letter. We applied at the bank.—Ahem! Huh? Mr. Drake had opened an account with them years ago; the balance was so much—about one winter's spending for Uncle Roger. We pressed 'em a little. Very irregular, said the bank; but, under the circumstances—ahem! It had been Mr. Drake's custom to make one large deposit each year, checking out the greater part of it before he put in more. What was a little unusual, he generally made these deposits personally and in cash; sometimes—ahem!—there had been drafts from Albuquerque or El Paso.

"So there we were! How much property? According to the pass book, Uncle Roger had been spending, on the average, about seven thousand a year, including his

two extravagances—father and yours truly. Said property was evidently in the grand new state of New Mex. But where, what and how much? Had Uncle Roger spent all his income or only part of it? All of it, we judged; for, with all respect to your so wonderful Southwest, my Uncle Roger thought life in any place more than half an hour away from Broadway was a frost. If he stayed there only four months in the year, it was because supplies didn't hold out."

"I knew of your uncle—never saw him," said Neighbor. "He lived very quietly. Stayed at the ranch mighty close; made no friends and no enemies. No mixer. Had no visitors from the outside. Hunted a little. No cowman. He didn't know anything about cattle, he wouldn't learn anything about cattle, and he didn't care anything about cattle. Left that all to his partner. That's his rep, according to campfire talk.

One thing's certain—your uncle didn't make any seven thousand per from the ranch, or any big part of it. The Double Dee outfit doesn't sell three hundred steers a year. Your uncle only got half of that and paid half the expenses. No, sir—that Double Dee brand helped some, but it was mostly a blind for something else."

"That's what I'm headed for," said Ducky. "Dad's an invalid; so I came out. At Albuquerque Mr. Drake had bought drafts at the banks. The hotels knew him but none of the business men had ever heard of him. El Paso, ditto. So he couldn't have been engaged in any business openly, aside from the ranch. I came to Saragossa. You know what I found here. Uncle Roger's whole bunch of cattle would have made about a year's pocket money for him. His partner offered me ten thousand for my half of ranch and cattle. That's enough to keep

the wolf from the well-known door, but hardly what was expected."

"Grab it! That's more than it's worth. I know. Jim-Ike, my new neighbor, worked that country last year."

"Quinliven—Uncle Ducky's pardner—showed me the tally book. According to that, my share would be about that much."

Jones bent his head to hide a significant smile.

"Take it! Well, what did he say about your uncle?"

"He didn't believe my uncle owned any property here. Didn't know what he might have back East. Close-mouthed codger, he was.

"My own idea all along had been that my uncle had a secret mine. I put this up to Qunliven. Secret mine? Rubbish! No one could work a secret mine in this country—where everything was known; where the

smoke of the strange camp fire was something of vital interest, to be looked into at once; where every cowpuncher had the time, ability and inclination to follow up any strange track.

"Fat chance, when all the freight from a country as big as an Eastern state was handled through one depot! Everybody knew all ore shipped—where it came from and what it run. Rubbish! Placer mines? 'Mai dear-r sir-r, to wash placer dirt, you must have water; and where water is, in New Mexico, is a frequented and public place.' Nuggets? Pish! Bosh! Nows!

"I questioned my uncle's banker and his lawyer. Great astonishment. Nothing knowing. Mr. Bennett showed me the joint account of Quinliven & Drake, with a very small balance. My uncle kept no private account; he knew of no other investment my uncle had made; no such sums as I mentioned

passed through his hands. The lawyer is now trying to solve my problem for me."

"Who's the lawyer?"

"He's a Mexican—a Mr. Octaviano Baca—and, at first, it seemed a rum start that Uncle Roger should have a native for his attorney. But he's a live one, all right; a very shrewd, keen person, indeed. Educated, too—good company; witty; speaks English with fluency and precision—much better English than I do. But doubtless you are acquainted with him. He is, I am told, something of a political power, having great influence with the natives."

Neighbor chuckled. He knew what young Drake did not. Octaviano Baca was the Boss—King of Saragossa.

"Know him by sight; never met him. But we know all about everything here, even people we've never seen. In this country our camp-fire talks take the place of Bradstreet

and Dun, or Who's Who. Great help. They ain't afraid to say what they think, them firelighters; and they ain't afraid to think what they say! We're all catalogued. . . . 'Jones, Neighbor. Good old wagon, but needs greasing. Use no hooks.' . . . That's me. I'm mighty proud of that biography too. So it is Baca and Bennett that are looking after your interests?"

"Baca alone now," corrected Ducky. "Bennett helped at first, making inquiries from his business connections, and so on. We thought if we could unearth some investment of my uncle's we might follow it up; but there was a silly gunplay on the range between Bennett's men and ours, and Bennett thought he had better withdraw from the investigation; because Quinliven took it up, you know—grouchy old sorehead!—talked pretty rough to Bennett, and took our account over to the other bank."

"What was the trouble about—mavericks?"

"I hardly know—pure cussedness, I guess. Nothing worth quarreling about. Tommy Garst and one of our boys had some words about some spring up in the mountains. All foolishness—nobody had any real title to it and everybody's cattle watered there; so it made no difference who claimed it. But they got to shooting over it—silly fools! Both gone now."

"Nobody hurt?"

"Dah!" said Ducky scornfully. "Well, how about that answer?"

Neighbor looked at his own toes with painstaking speculative interest. To assist the process he cocked his head on one side and screwed his mouth up. At last he glanced over at Ducky.

"I know a lot if I could only think of it," he announced plaintively. With a thought-

ful face and apparently without his own knowledge, he broke into song, with a gay, lilting voice:

"Here I am, a-comin' on the run—

Best durn cowboy 'at ever pulled a gun!

Hi-yi-yi-yippy; yippy-yi-yi-yi!

Hi-yi-yi-yippy; yippy-yea!"

Ducky sniffed.

"Why don't you learn a tune if you want to sing?"

Neighbor looked round with puckered eyes.

"Why, I ain't singin'—not exactly!" he answered dreamily. "I'm thinkin'—thinkin' about your troubles and how to make 'em all come out right in the next number. I've got a two-story mind, you see. One of 'em is diggin' away for you, hard, while the other one is singin', foot-loose, or talking to you. Me and the real serious-mind, we're studyin'

right now; we don't hardly sense what I'm sayin' to you. And that's a real nice tune too. I don't like to have you make fun of that tune. That's a saddle song. That tune goes to a trotting horse. You try it."

"Why, so it does!" said Ducky after a brief experiment.

"Can you make your fingers go gallop-y? Well, do it, and I'll show you another. But don't talk to me. I'm thinking fine and close, like walkin' a rope; and you'll throw me off."

So Ducky made his fingers go gallop-y and Neighbor kept time to it:

*"Percival Pulcifer Peterkin Pool,
Cloaked and mittened and ready for school;
Cloaked and muffled and gloved and
spurred.
Gee! Wasn't Peter a wise old bird?"*

"Any more?" demanded Ducky, highly diverted.

"Yes; here's a pacing tune. They say," added Neighbor absently, "they say, back in Maryland and Virginia, that old King James Fifth wrote this song—allowing for some expurgating and change o' names—Albuquerque for Edinburgh—to give it local color. Hark!

*"Oh, when I got to Albuquerque I taken
down my sign—*

Tirra-la-la, tirra-la-la, lay!

*Oh, when I got to Albuquerque I taken
down my sign,*

*For they're all educated there in the riding
line—*

Ti-ri-laddy and a ti-ri-lay!"

Here Neighbor brought his tilted chair back to level, removed his clasped hands from the back of his head, and shook off his dreamy expression.

"Well, I guess I'll have to give it up for this time," he sighed.

"Yah!" said Ducky, grinning. "A pish and three long tushes! You big stiff! I thought you were going to tell me money, money, who's got the money? and where Uncle Roger plucked it in the first place. Little Ducky, he sticks to his first guess—mines—and counterfeiting, for place."

"Where he got it? Where—— My poor, poor boy!" said Neighbor. "My poor misguided lamb, I wasn't studying on who's got your uncle's money; I was figuring on a harder thing—and that's how you and me are going to get it. I know where your uncle's money is. I know it was really cash money, too, and not property. And I know how he got it!"

Ducky stared.

"Business of gasp!" he said. "Demonstrate! Produce!"

"Wait a minute!" said Neighbor, holding up a warning hand. "How do you bate your breath? If you know, do it!"

"She's bated. Break it to me!"

"I'll tell you first and give you the reasons afterward; it makes the reasons sound so much more reasonable, that way."

" 'You may fire when ready, Gridley!' "

"Hist!" said Neighbor, weird, shaky and spook-eyed. "Listen to the evil old man of Haunted Hill! Your uncle was the Man Higher Up! He made his money backing gambling hells! U-r-r-r-h! The men who have now got that money-money are Beck, Baca, Scanlon, Quinliven and Bennett! And the men who are now going to get that money-money—open another bottle, Ducky—are Roger Olcott Drake, Second—Present!—and Neighbor Jones—Present! But how? How? How?"

Chapter V

ROGER DRAKE caught his breath. "Sir, do you inhale it or do you use a needle? Can you prove any of that?"

"Prove it!" returned Neighbor indignant-ly. "I don't have to prove it—I know it. It's just gemimini-mentally got to be that way. There ain't no proofs—the kind to convince a jury of peers; but there's no other way to account for what's happened, and, if you're not a natural-born peer, I can show you."

"Among the many beauties that add luster to my character are an aptitude to be shown and a simple willingness to try anything—once. Go to it, old summit! Wise me up!"

"Ver-ree well! Let us examine the sim-

ple and jolly facts—well known, but not to you. Tavy Baca is abso-lute-ly the Big Noise in Saragossa County—accent on loot. Nominations and appointments f. o. b. for cash with order. Special terms for convictions and acquittals. Try our land-office decisions. Small graft of all kinds. Corpses to order in neat hardwood boxes. Very Roycrofty. See us before trying elsewhere.

“Laying all juries aside, he’s a smart lawyer—Baca. He might be immensely wealthy, but every Mexican within a radius, when he’s sick, lazy or in trouble, makes a beeline for Baca and comes away with a jingle in his pocket. It’s like packin’ water in a sieve.

“Gambling, as perhaps you know, is completely stamped out in New Mexico since she joined the glorious sisterhood. Baca would be getting a juicy rake-off from Beck’s

game. Or, since Baca was your uncle's lawyer, uncle made the necessary arrangements himself, likely."

"But how do you know my uncle was behind Beck?"

"I don't—that comes later. I am now giving you known facts only, and you can build for yourself wherever they'll fit.

"Bennett owns a heap of other people's property. He began life by ruining Brown and Almandares—take thy bill and write down fifty—deliberately smashed 'em so he could get the wreckage. As he began, he kept on—a wrecker. He has no heart, lungs, lights or liver. I knew Almandares; and the good Lord never made a better man than that old Mexican.

"Let me at once show you the impassable gulf between Bennett and a common cheat like Beck, or like Scanlon—blacklegs, card sharps, flimflammers. With the Beck

kind, you lose only what they win. The Bennett kind gladly makes you lose ten dollars so he can get one. To end with, Beck and Scanlon showed a tenderness toward you not wholly explained by your many charms of face and form. It was magnificent, but it was not poker. And there's where I first got the hunch.

"Having stolen the big bundle, they, or either of them, felt a certain delicacy about cheating you for your small change; so what they won from you they won fair. But banker Bennett, with his share put up in moth balls, he's so scared you might find out and pry it away from him that he wants to hire you killed!"

Ducky Drake made an impassioned remark. It was a household word.

"What makes it a good deal worse," added Jones with exceeding bitterness, "is that he picked on me to let the contracts to."

"Well, but——"

"But, nothing! That is one word I can't bear. He offered to cancel the mortgage on my stuff if I'd expurgate you. That means nearly two thousand perfectly good bucks. Why? Would Bennett do that from civic pride? Nary! He's got a big bunch of your money—that's why. Is there any other possible reason?"

"Mere as I am," said Ducky, "I can see that. There is not. But how does all this involve the others? And what makes you hook up my uncle with the kitty industry?"

"When a man loves money and not work; when a man has run through three fortunes, two of 'em his own; when he turns up with a taxable income made in Saragossa County—how did he make it? How can he make it? Openly, in mines, sheep, cattle, store-keeping, liquor or law. But, except for one

cattle ranch, misses' size, your uncle had no business relations—openly.

“What kind of business is done secretly? Business that is very profitable and not well thought of; counterfeiting—smuggling—gambling. This wasn't smuggling—too far from the border. Nor counterfeiting—else he might have printed off enough to let him live in New York. Also, it couldn't possibly be counterfeiting, because it was gambling.

“Now, Beck and Scanlon run the only dens in Saragossa and at Ridgepole. Because they are all involved, your uncle must have been hooked up with gambling; and, because your uncle was hooked up with gambling, they're all involved.”

Ducky looked dazed; with tolerable reason.

“Quinliven is involved bad and big and sure. He offered to take your cattle for the full number on the tally book. No cow-

man would do that. The calves on that tally are sold, lost, strayed, stolen, eaten, skinned, and gone with the wild bunch. Quinnie, he wanted to get little Ducky out of the country.

"That shooting scrape was all fake; so you wouldn't suspect him and Banker Bennett of standin' in. Real sincere people don't empty their guns and not hit anybody—it ain't respectable. But Bennett he intended to make that water hole the explanation of your bein' found dead and promiscuous. That's what he proposed to me."

"Oh, goils, pinch me!"

"Baca is involved by being your uncle's lawyer, and yet not knowing how your uncle extracted that nice little income from Saragossa County; and by being your lawyer and not finding out. And old Beck and Scanlon are involved by their conscientious

scruples in not wanting the last rag off your back."

Ducky remonstrated.

"Hi! You put that last in to make it easy—like the Englishman who always added 'and barks like a dog' to all his riddles, to make 'em harder. You're throwing the long arm of coincidence out of socket. It won't wash, my Angular-Saxon friend! You're a good old superdreadnought and the best hand at a standing high guess I've ever seen—but we can't go to court waving any wild, wet tale like that."

"Court? Oh, Jemima! Who said court? Let Tavy Baca pick the jury and you couldn't convict one of that push on his own written confession. The right hunch is go-in' to be the best evidence, where we settle this case—and that's out of court."

"Do you mean to use force?"

"Thank you, I shouldn't wish any pie.

Why, Ducky dear, some of that outfit would lock horns with Julius K. Cæsar if he looked ogle-eyed at 'em. Tavy Baca especially is a cold proposition—the worst west of a given point. Only one skunk in the firm. That's Bennett. No, sir; if you want to touch that tainted money——”

“I do. Let me leave no chance for misapprehension. I want to roll in it! I want to puddle my paddies in it!”

“Then you've got to guess quick and guess right and guess hard; you've got to mean what you think, and dig in your toes when you pray! To handle this contract you have got to have the hunch, the punch, the pep and the wallop!”

“But, even if you're right——”

“If you say that again I'll quit you!” declared Jones indignantly.

“Don't say dem crool woids to me!” begged Ducky. “You're horribly right——

but where are you going to begin? It's like climbing a glass wall."

"Oh, no—not so bad as that! We have one highly important circumstance in our favor. They haven't divided the spoils yet. If they had they wouldn't be trying to get you out of the way. And when they do divide—about this time look out for squalls; for I judge that most of that cash was left on deposit with Bennett. The hell-house-keepers will have the rest—what they had for the house roll when they heard that Uncle Roger had cashed in, and what they've won or lost since.

"When you came on and it became plain that you didn't know anything about your uncle's business, there they were! Bennett couldn't keep it all—the gamblers would give the snap away unless they got their share. They couldn't get it all—Bennett would tell you first."

"Oh, my, my! Birds in their little nests should not fall out!"

Jones ignored the interruption.

"Baca and Quinliven horned in too—they each want a slice; but Bennett won't let it out of his hands till you go home. He's afraid you'll find instructions from your uncle or some sort of a statement."

"Uncle Roger knew, in a vague, general way, that men died; but he thought that was only other people—people in the papers," explained Roger. "And yet he must have kept a pass book, receipts—something to show for his deposits."

"Exactly! Beck and Baca, between them, have got the pass book, and hold it over Bennett's head for a club, likely. That's real funny. Bennett's the one that's taken all the risks, this load. Generally it's somebody else that takes the chances, while Bennett gets the profit."

"Well! You certainly are a wise old fowl!" said Roger with explosive emphasis.

"If your uncle had trusted him, I think, maybe, Quinliven might have come across—I judge he would. I reckon Quinnie, old boy, was just uncle's blind; but he guessed something and butted in to blackmail the blackmailers. To make it nice and pleasant all round, him and Baca will be wanting the gamesters to throw the house roll into the pool along with the rest, and then split it all up, even Stephen. I would right much admire to witness the executive session of that firm when they declare the final dividend!" said Neighbor with a chuckle. Then his brow clouded.

"But I can't. Because we're going to get it. To begin with, suppose you step round and take Quinnie up on his offer for your cattle. Stick out for cash. He hasn't got it, but he'll make the others dig it up from

the sinking fund. Right then that company will begin to get a pain in the stumick-ache. They'll see you makin' ready to go 'way and they'll all begin playing for position. You hang to your cattle selling as though you didn't have another idea on earth."

Neighbor Jones rose to go.

"And while you start that I'm going round and throw the clutch of circumstance into the high gear."

Chapter VI

IN the lobby of the Windsor Hotel, as Neighbor Jones came down the stairs, Mr. Octaviano Baca chatted with a little knot of guests. A well-set-up man, tall and strong, with a dark, intelligent face marred and pitted by smallpox but still pleasing, he carried his two score years with the ease of twenty. A gay man, a friendly man, his manner was suave and easy; his dress, place considered, rigorously correct—frock coat, top hat, stick, gloves and gun. The gun was covered, not concealed, by the coat; a chivalrous concession to the law, of which he was so much an ornament.

Baca was born to riches, and born to the leadership of the clans. He had brains in his own right; but it was his entire and often

proved willingness to waive any advantage and to discuss any moot point with that gun which had won him admiration from the many and forgiveness from the few.

Mr. Jones sank into a quiet chair and read the newspapers. When Mr. Baca, after several false starts, left his friends and went out on the street, Mr. Jones rose and followed him. Mr. Baca turned in at Beck's place, Jones behind him.

Gambling was completely eliminated in Saragossa, but the saloon was in high favor legally; so Beck and Scanlon kept a saloon openly on the ground floor. The poker rooms and the crap, monte, roulette and faro layouts were upstairs. Their existence was a profound secret. No stranger could find the gambling den in Saragossa without asking somebody—anyone would do; unless, indeed, he heard, as he passed, the whir of the ivory ball or the clicking of chips.

Baca, with a nod and a smile for the bar, passed on to join a laughing crowd behind, where two native boys were enjoying a bout with the gloves. Neighbor leaned on the bar. The partners were ill matched. Beck was tall, portly and, except for a conscientious, professional smile, of a severe countenance, blond, florid and flaxen. Scanlon was a slender wisp of a blue-eyed Irishman, dried up, wizened and silent.

"Well, boys," said Neighbor jovially, "I got to go back to the hills and grow a new fleece. Till then, you've lost my game. Sorry."

Beck frowned.

"I hate to see a good fellow go bust. If boys like you had plenty of money I wouldn't never have to work. Well, hurry on back! And come straight here the first night, before you waste any on clothes and saddles and stuff." He lowered his voice

for Neighbor's ears. "Say, if you're short, you know—hotel bills, and so on—come round." He jerked a confidential thumb at the house safe.

"Not so bad as that!" laughed Neighbor. "But you want to sharpen your shears up. They pulled a little this time." He passed on to the circle round the boxers.

It was late dusk when, after certain sociable beverages, Mr. Baca bethought himself of supper and started homeward. As he swung along the sidewalk Mr. Jones was close behind. Mr. Baca took the first turn to the left: Mr. Jones took the first turn to the left. Mr. Baca cut across the Park: Mr. Jones also cut across the Park, now almost at his quarry's heels. Mr. Baca wheeled.

"Did you wish to speak with me?"

Neighbor came forward, with an air of relief.

"Why—er—not exactly; but I'd just as lief as not. And it'll be easier for me, now it's getting so dark. You see," he said confidentially, "I'm shadowing you!"

"You're—what?"

"Shadowing you. You seemed to have plenty of money; and I thought," said Neighbor hopefully, "that I might catch you doing something wrong and blackmail you."

"Are you trying to break into jail?" demanded Baca sharply. "You are either intoxicated or mentally deficient. In either case——"

"No, no," said Neighbor soothingly. "I'm not drunk. I really need the money."

"Except that I doubt your sanity," said the outraged lawyer, "I'd make you regret this bitterly. Do you know who I am?"

"Sure! You're Tavy Baca—Boss, Prosecuting Attorney and two-gun man. And please don't talk that way about me," Neigh-

bor pleaded in an injured voice. "It makes me feel bad. You wouldn't like it yourself. Don't you know me? I'm not insane. I'm Jones—Neighbor Jones. I've been bucking the poker game at Beck's. But there—you don't know about the poker game, of course—you being Prosecuting Attorney and all."

"See here!" said Baca with a dull, ugly note, "if you're looking for trouble you can get enough for a mess!"

"Not trouble—money!"

"I warn you now," Baca advised. "Do not follow me another step. I'm going."

Jones burst into joyous laughter with so free and unfeigned a note that Baca turned again.

"Come!" cried Jones. "I know what you think I'm going to say—that before I started I left a sealed envelope with a friend and told him if I didn't come back by X o'clock to break the seal and be guided by the con-

tents—that's what you thought I'd say. But you're wrong!" Unhesitatingly he took the few steps separating him from that silent, angry figure in the starlight. "Nobody knows what I'm up to but you and me and God, and you're not right sure. So don't waste any more breath on warnings. I'm warned—and you are!"

Without a word Baca turned at right angles to his homeward course, and led the way swiftly up the dark and steep street to a dark and silent quarter of the Mexican suburb. Toward the street, these old adobe homes presented a blank wall; windows, and all doors save one, fronting on the inclosed *patio*.

"It's like this," said Jones cheerfully, pressing along the narrow way a yard behind: "I had a nice little bunch of cows—nigh onto two hundred—out in the Monuments. And Bennett, he was projecting

about like a roarin' lion out there; and he says: 'Jones, why don't you buy the Bar Nothing brand?' 'No money,' says I. . . . I say, Baca, don't go so fast! This ain't no Marathon! Lonesome, shivery place, isn't it?"

The silent figure walked still swifter.

"Oh, all right, then! 'I'll lend you the money,' says Bennett, 'an' take a mortgage on both brands.' 'There'll come a drought,' says I, 'and them cattle will lay down and die on me, a lot of 'em; and I'll find myself in a fix.' And he did, and they did, and I did."

No word from Baca. In the black shadow of the dark unlighted houses he passed swiftly and unhesitatingly. Jones continued:

"Since that I paid him all but eighteen hundred-odd; and now the mortgage comes due pretty sudden, and I stand to lose both

brands. . . . Say, Baca, where're you takin' me to? Some gang of thugs? You can do that all right—but I'll get you first and I'll get you hard, and I'll get you sure! Don't make any mistake!"

Baca gave way to his feelings.

"Oh, bother!" he said, and stopped, irresolute.

"What do you mean anyway, actin' the way you do?" demanded Jones, mopping his forehead. "Wouldn't it sound silly, if I lay a-dyin', for you to threaten me with jail and shootin' and law? They'd sound real futile, wouldn't they? Well, I'm dying right now. I've been a long time at it; but there ain't no cure for what ails me but death. I refer, of course, to the malady of living."

"Damn your eyes!" cried the exasperated King of Saragossa; and he began rapidly to retrace his steps.

"And so," continued the dying man, keep-

ing pace, "I don't never back up. When I start out to blackmail a man he might just as well be nice about it, 'cause I'm going to blackmail him."

Despite himself, Baca had to laugh.

"What are you going to blackmail me for?"

"About two thousand," said Jones.

"But what have I done?"

"Good Lord, man!" said Jones blankly.

"I don't know!"

"Come!" said Baca, and clapped his persecutor on the back. "I like a brave man, even if he is a damned fool! Come home to supper with me. I've got a little bachelor establishment beyond the Park, with an old Mexican *hombre* who can give you the best meal in town."

"You're on! And after supper, then we can fix up that mortgage, can't we? I want

to specify that now, so I can eat your salt without prejudice."

"And now," said Baca, replenishing his guest's wine-glass, "about the blackmail. Of what particular misdeed do you accuse me?"

"When you asked me to supper," said Jones thoughtfully, "you virtually admitted there was something. You see that? But I don't like to intrude on your private affairs—to butt in, as we say in Harvard."

The host fixed keen eyes on him.

"As we say in Harvard? Yes," he purred. "Go on!"

"It is very distasteful to me. Instead of me naming your crime—or crimes—why could you not beg me to accept a suitable sum as a recognition of my good taste? Just as you please! It's up to you."

"As we say in Harvard!" suggested Baca

lightly, lifting his brows with another piercing look.

"As we say in Harvard," agreed Jones. "Any sum, so long as it comes to exactly two thousand. Or, you might use your influence to get Bennett to cancel my mortgage—that would be the same thing. He offered to cancel it once this afternoon—on a condition."

"And that condition?"

"Was not acceptable. It betrayed too plainly the influence—the style, we might say—of the James brothers."

"William and Henry?"

"Jesse and Frank. Man, dear," said Neighbor with sudden, vehement bitterness, "you and me, we're no great shakes. You're goin' to rob young Drake and I'm going to take hush money for it; but this man Bennett is a stinking, rancid, gray-headed old synonym. He is so scared he won't be happy

till he gets that boy killed. If I was as big a coward as that, durned if I'd steal at all!"

Baca struck the table sharply; splotches of angry red flamed in his cheeks.

"And I told him I wouldn't stand for it! Damn him! Look here, Jones, you ought to be boiled in oil for your stupefying insolence; but, just to punish him, I'll make Bennett pay your price. It will be like drawing teeth; give me time."

Chapter VII

THE rain drenched in long shudders. Here and there a late lamp blurred dimly at a pane; high-posted street lamps, at unequal and ineffectual distances, glowed red through the slant lines of rain, reflected faintly from puddle and gutter at their feet. Alone, bent, boring into the storm, Martin Bennett shouldered his way to Baca's door under the rushing night.

A gush of yellow struck across the dark—the door opened at his first summons; he was waited for. The master of the house helped him from his raincoat and ushered him through crimson portières into a warm and lighted room. Three men sat before an open fire, where a table gleamed with glasses and bottles. There were two other doors,

hung, like the first, with warm, bright colors, reflecting and tingeing the light from fire and lamp—a cheerful contrast to the raw, bleak night outside.

Here the good cheer ceased. The three faces, as they turned to scowl at the newcomer, were sullen, distrustful and lowering.

Despite the raincoat, Bennett was sodden to his knees; his hands and face and feet were soaked and streaming. No friendly voice arose to remark on his plight; an ominous silence had prevailed since the street door had opened to him. He bent shivering to the fire. With no word the host filled and brought to him a stiff glass of liquor. Bennett drained it eagerly and a little color crept back into his pinched features.

Owen Quinliven broke silence then, with a growl deep in his throat.

“Thought you’d better come, eh?” His mustached lip bristled.

"The storm was so bad. I thought it might let up after a while," said Bennett miserably.

"Don't make that an excuse," said Beck with a cold sneer. "You might have slipped over to our place, a short block; or you could have had us meet you at your own office."

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" expostulated Baca, with a curling lip. "You do not understand. Mr. Bennett has his position to think of. Mr. Bennett is highly respectable. He could not let it be known that he had traffic with professional gamblers like Mr. Beck and the estimable Scanlon." He bowed ironically; the estimable Scanlon rolled a slow, wicked little eye, and Baca's cheek twitched as he went on: "I say nothing, as you observe, of myself or of our worthy friend Quinliven, who, as I perceive, is in a very bad temper."

Quinliven glowered at the speaker like a baited bull. He was a huge, burly man with a shaggy, brindled head, a bull neck, a russet face knotted with hard red lumps, and small, fiery, amber-colored eyes under a thick tangle of bushy brows. The veins swelled in his neck as he answered.

“Well, he’ll have some traffic with me, and do it quick! Here I’ve talked young Drake into selling out and going home; I’m giving him twenty-five hundred dollars too much, standin’ the loss out of my share—and me not getting a full share at all! All I get is the cattle, while the rest of you pull down nearly twelve thousand apiece, net cash. That part is all right though. That’s my own proposition. I don’t begrudge the little extra money to the boy, and I want him to get away from here for his own sake as well as for mine. This crawling, slimy Bennett thing is bound to have that boy

killed." He glared at the steaming banker by the fire. "I don't see how that man got by with it so long. He wouldn't last long on the range. And now, after I've made the trade, Bennett hems and haws, and hangs fire about giving up the money."

"You don't understand," protested the wretched banker. "You'll get your share; but it would inconvenience me dreadfully to take that amount of money immediately from a little private bank like mine. In ninety days, or even sixty, I can so adjust my affairs as to settle with all of you."

"My heart bleeds for you," said Beck sympathetically. "For I'm going to inconvenience you a heap more. You'll adjust your affairs in less than ninety hours, or even sixty. I've been fooled with long enough. That pass book calls for a little over forty-six thousand dollars. We expected to get half. Instead we've got to split

it four ways. Young Drake is going and I want my split right now."

"What about me?" cried the banker in wild and desperate indignation. "What do I get? Barely a fourth! And you two have Drake's money already—heaven knows how much!"

"Heaven don't," said Beck.

"But do I get any of that?" shouted the outraged banker.

"You do not," returned Beck. "In the first place, the men are different. You stepped out of your class when you started to mingle with the likes of us. Why should you bother to rob a perfect stranger anyhow? And you with money corded up! I don't understand it."

"Bennett!" cried the ranchman, "if I stood in your shoes, before I'd allow any man to use me like we're using you, I'd go to Drake and give that money up. I'd say: 'Young

fellow, I meant to rob you; but my conscience troubles me, and so do my feet.' You ain't got the gall, and you're too big a hog. I dare you to!"

"And in the next place," continued the complacent gambler, ignoring the interruption, "there's not one scrap of paper to connect our money with Old Drake. Part of it is ours anyhow, that we've made honestly——"

"At poker," corrected Scanlon.

"At poker, I should say. But we've got your receipts, Mr. Banker. That's what makes you squirm! And they're where you can't get 'em; so it won't do you any good to get any of us murdered, the way you tried to do that boy."

"He tried it again yesterday," interposed Baca softly.

Quinliven brought his heavy hand crashing down on the table.

"You damned coward! I told you to drop that!" His red mustache prickled fiercely; above his eyes the red tufts knotted to bunches. He glanced round at his fellows. "Look here; there's no damn sense in hurting that kid, the way things stand. If Drake gets killed over this I'm going to see that Bennett swings for it if I have to swing with him—the yellow cur!"

The banker shriveled under his look.

"Your sentiments do you vast credit," observed Baca suavely. "I concur most heartily. But, my good fellow, why bawl your remarks?" He accompanied the query with a pleasant smile.

Scanlon raised his head to watch. The ranchman's fingers worked and quivered; for a moment it seemed as though he would leap on his tormentor; but he settled back.

"I'm with you," said Scanlon.

Then, noting that Beck did not commit

himself to this self-denying ordinance, he filled a glass with wine and, as he drank it, observed his partner narrowly from the tail of his eye.

"You may rest easy, Mr. Quinliven," observed Baca, straddling with his back to the fire and his hands to the blaze. "There will be no need for you to carry out your chivalrous intention. I assure you that while I live I am perfectly capable of selecting a jury that will hang Mr. Bennett without the disastrous concomitant you mention; and I shall take great pleasure in doing so should need arise. I should hate to see you hanged, Quinliven—I should indeed! You distress me! But I fear——" He left the sentence unfinished, shaking his head sorrowfully. "Mr. Bennett, I am sure, will bear himself to conform with our wishes. However, I find myself in full accord with Mr. Bennett in the matter of the moneys now in the hands

of Messrs. Beck and Scanlon, and wrongfully withheld from our little pool."

"That will be a plenty," said Beck. "For fear of mistakes I will now declare myself. We admit that we have a bundle of the Drake money and we announce that we are going to keep it. How much, is nobody's business but our own. In consideration of that fact, however, the two of us lay claim to only one full share of the Drake deposit. That gives us twelve thousand; Bennett as much; the Honorable Prosecuting Attorney the same; the Double Dee brand to Quinliven. That's final!"

"I suppose you know, Mr. Beck," said Baca, cupping his chin, "your little joint can be closed any time I lift a finger?"

"Baca," said Scanlon with level eyes, "you'll close nawthin'! We bought protection from you. We'll get what we bought. When you feel any doubts comin' on, don't

talk to Beck about it. Talk to me! And," he added with venomous intensity, "one more word about any divvy on our poker roll and that pass book goes to Ducky Drake!" He tapped his breast. "I've got the pass book—not Beck."

"Well, well," said Baca indulgently, "have your own way. Far be it from me to question any gentleman's ultimatum, and so, perhaps, bring a discordant note into our charming evening. Let us pass on to the next subject. Is everybody happy? No! Mr. Bennett is not happy. Mr. Bennett is a very able man, as we all know—exemplar to the young—a rich man, merchant prince, and all that. And yet we can quite understand that he may be temporarily embarrassed for actual cash. I, for one, am willing to allow him a reasonable time. He cannot hide his real estate; so we shall be taking no risks. Doubtless we can stand

off young Drake for the price of his cattle by giving him good security."

The silent Scanlon leaped up and snarled in unimaginable ferocity.

"If there's any more shilly-shally there'll be a Standing Room Only sign on the gates of hell and the devil sending out a hurry-up call for the police!" His voice swelled in breathless crescendo. "I'm sick of you—the whole pack and pilin'! I want to get so far away from here it'll take nine dollars to send me a postcard; so far east they'll give me change for a cent; so far north the sun don't go down till after dark." His eyes were ablaze with blistering scorn. "Gawd! Look at yourselves! Quinliven—the honorable, high-minded, grave-robbing pardner——"

"Here!" bellowed Quinliven savagely. "I came through with the cattle, straight as a die! That's as far as I was any pard-

ner of Drake's. You don't know how that man treated me! It wasn't only me doing all the work—but his cold, sneering, overbearing——”

“Shut up, you polled Angus bull!” yelled Scanlon with a howl of joyous truculence. “And Bennett—faugh! P-t-t-h!”

Scanlon spat in the fire, and wheeled on the other gambler. Beck's face was black with concentrated hate. The little man pointed a taunting finger.

“Look at Beck!” he jeered. “Guess what he knows I think of 'im! And I know him—he's me pardner! Fish mouth and mackerel eye—— Yah! And all three of you knuckle down to Baca! Year after year you let yourselves be bullyragged, brow-beaten, lorded over by a jury-packing, witness-bribing shyster—a grafter, a crook, a dirty Mexican——”

Without hesitation or change of counte-

nance Baca walked across the open space toward him.

"Not one step more!" said Scanlon.

Baca stopped in his tracks.

"You nervy little runt," he said, half in admiration, "you mean it! Well, I mean this, too. If I'm a crook—and there is much in favor of that contention—it is because my personal inclination lies that way, and not in the least because of my Mexican blood. I am quite clear on that point. Leave out the part about the dirty Mexican and I don't take that other step. Otherwise, I step! Choose!"

"I withdraw the Mexican!" said Scanlon ungrudgingly. "Dod! I believe you're the best of the rotten bunch!"

"Go on, then: 'Grafter, crook'——" prompted Baca.

"Why—er—really!" stammered Scanlon. Then he brightened. "There has been so

much said, and, on the whole, so well said,' " he beamed, canting his head on one side with a flat, oily smile, " 'that I will not further detain you.' "

He seated himself, with a toothy, self-satisfied expression; but the allusion was lost on all except the delighted Baca.

In glum silence, Quinliven reached for a bottle and glared at the little Irishman, who smiled evilly back at him.

"There is one more point," observed Baca in his best courtroom manner, "on which I touch with a certain delicacy and, as it were, with hesitation. I am reluctant to grieve further a spirit already distressed; but the fact is, gentlemen, our impulsive friend here"—he laid a gentle hand on Bennett's shoulder and Bennett squeaked—"undertook yesterday to employ this man Jones—Neighbor Jones—to murder our friend Drake. I take this most unkindly."

He teetered on his tiptoes; he twirled his eyeglasses; his hand made a pleasant jingle with key ring and coin; his face expressed a keen sense of well-being and social benevolence.

"As a matter of abstract principle, even before we had learned to love our young friend Drake, we decided that such a step was unnecessary and inexpedient; and so informed Mr. Bennett. But the idea of slaying Mr. Drake seems to have become an obsession with Mr. Bennett—or, as English Ben would put it, a fad. As English Ben would say, again, Mr. Bennett is a beastly blighter."

He adjusted the eyeglasses and beamed round on his cowed and sullen confederates, goaded, for his delight, to madness and desperation; and on the one uncowed co-devil, the mordant and cynical Scanlon.

"Our young Eastern friend has endeared

himself to our hearts. I do not exaggerate when I say that we feel quite an avuncular interest in his fortunes. We are deeply hurt by Mr. Bennett's persistence; but let us not be severe. In this case retribution has been, as we might say, automatic, for the man Jones, by some means, has acquired an inkling of the posture in which our affairs lie in the little matter of the Drake estate; though I believe he suspects only Bennett and myself. Bennett, I judge, has talked too much. And—such is the wickedness and perfidy of the human mind—the man Jones makes a shameless demand on us for two thousand dollars, money current with the merchant, as the price of silence. Alas, that such things can be!”

His hands, now deep in his trousers pockets, expressed a lively abhorrence for the perfidy of the man Jones.

“This iniquitous demand is no better than

blackmail and might be resisted in our courts of justice; but, inasmuch as Mr. Bennett's sanguinary disposition has brought on us this fresh complication, would it not be well to permit Mr. Bennett to pay this two thousand from his private pocket? I pause for a reply."

Bennett let out a screech between a howl and a shriek.

"This is infamous! You're robbing me! Oh, why did I ever have dealings with such desperadoes?"

"Why, indeed?" said Baca tranquilly. "I think, if you will permit me to criticize, that was a mistake in judgment on your part, Mr. Bennett. You have not the temperament for it."

"He pays!" said Scanlon, gloating.

"He pays!" echoed the rancher.

"You're robbing me!" Bennett crumpled to a wailing heap.

"We're not, ye black scut!" snapped Scanlon, perking the unfortunate banker upright by the collar. "But we will! We're now holding to the exact bargain we proposed and you agreed to; but if ever little Mickey S. has need or desire av the red, red gold or the green, green greenback, 'tis back here he will come to you. May Gawd have mercy on your soul! Sit up, ye spineless jellyfish—sit up!"

Beck, sitting mute in a cold fury of hate, raised his eyes.

"This Neighbor Jones—I had a letter about him to-day. He's caught on, some-way, that we've been workin' him over in the shop; and he's layin' for us, I guess. That big lump that called himself the Kansas City Kid—'twas him that wrote the letter. Jones accused him of cheating and drove him out of town—took his gun, made him leave his clothes, and hike. That's a

dangerous man, Baca. Now I think of it, young Drake quit us at the same time. Jones told him our game was crooked, likely."

"Them two was together all this forenoon—I seen 'em," contributed Quinliven. "Is Jones maybe fixing to give you the double cross?"

Baca considered with contracted brow.

"Possibly; but not necessarily so," he said. "Drake agreed to sell last night. Perhaps he merely got wise to himself—to use his own phrase—and decided to sell out and go home while the going was good. Jones would be his natural associate, the two having been bucking the game together; but Jones expects to get clear of his debt by sticking to me. He could gain nothing by telling Drake. We are too powerful. He knows there is no way to make us disgorge—disgorge is the word, I think, in this

connection. I find Jones most amusing, myself. If he wearies me——”

“Don’t you figure Jones for any easy mark,” warned Scanlon. “If he tries to hand us something—look out! He is a bad actor.”

“Leave him to me,” said Baca with a tightening of the lips. “I’ll take measures to improve his acting. Never mind Jones. We have now satisfactorily adjusted the preliminaries, have we not? It is established, I believe, that Mr. Scanlon and myself constitute a clear majority of this meeting. Any objection? In that case, let us now get down to the sad and sordid business before us. It is the sense of the meeting, as I take it, that Mr. Bennett shall bring to this room, by ten o’clock to-morrow—no; to-morrow is Sunday—by ten o’clock on Monday, the purchase money for the Double Dee cattle.”

"Oh-h!" It was a mournful howl, a dog's hopeless plaint to the moon; emitted, however, by one of the gentlemen present.

"Objection overruled. You will, also, Mr. Bennett, provide twenty-four thousand dollars to satisfy the other equities, here held in the Drake estate."

Scanlon held up a finger.

"Cash, you moind! No checks or drafts, to be headed off. Coin or greenbacks! I will not be chipracked by this slippery ould man. He is the human greased pig."

By a prodigious effort Bennett pulled himself together; his face was very pale.

"To provide that much cash, without warning, is impossible. I should have nothing left to do the bank's business with; in fact, I have not half that amount of actual cash in the safe."

He stood up and grasped the back of a

chair—his knuckles were white as he gripped; his voice grew firmer.

“I’ll be open with you, gentlemen. I am too much extended; I am bitterly cramped for ready money. Give me time to turn round; don’t force me to take this money out of the business now. Once let the ordinary loans be refused to a few customers; let the rumor of it go abroad; let my Eastern creditors once hear of it—and I must inevitably stand a heavy loss. They will demand immediate payment, and that I cannot make without sacrifice.”

“What would your creditors think if they knew what we know?” answered Beck. “You’ll make your sacrifice right now, within forty-eight hours, for your preferred creditors, here present.”

“Baca! I appeal to you. Help me! I’ll be honest. To pay out this sum will not ruin me, but it’ll cripple me so that it may

take me years to recover. At the very best I shall lose far more than the pitiful remnant of the Drake money you leave me. Give me time to turn round! Give me thirty days!"

"Thirty hours," said Beck; "Monday morning."

"I tell you it will cost me two dollars for every one I pay over to you now," the banker pleaded. "Let me give you certificates of deposit."

"That's what you gave Drake!" said Scanlon.

For the first time in the somber silence that followed they heard the loud clock on the mantel—tick, tock—tick, tock—tick, tock!

Baca spoke at last slowly and thoughtfully.

"Bennett, you have good standard securities in the El Paso National, pledged for a

comparatively small amount, as I happen to know. You can sell them by wire and have the money here by the last train on Monday. That's what you'd better do. Personally I am not inclined——"

"Here is too much talk," said Scanlon. "Cash or smash!"

Bennett threw up his hand in a gesture of despair.

"I'll get it on Monday. Let me go home."

"There now! I knew you would do the right thing if we forced you to!" Baca went to the window. "It is not raining hard; so perhaps you had better go home, as you suggest, Mr. Bennett. You seem fatigued. But the rest of you will stay with me for the night, I trust. I have good beds; here is wine and fire; and we can have a quiet rubber. No stakes, of course." He twist-

ed his mouth and cocked an eyebrow at Beck.

"I'm gone!" announced Beck. He brushed by without a glance at the others, jerked his hat and slicker from the rack, and flung out into the night.

"Now who would suspect the urbane and lovable Beck of being so sensitive?" asked Baca, rocking on his feet. "We shall not have our whist game after all. You two will stay, however? Yes? That's good!" said the host. "Have a glass of wine before you go, Bennett. No? Let me help you on with your raincoat, then. You have your rubbers?" He held the door open. "Good night!"

Chapter VIII

BECK did not take his way to his own rooms despite the lateness of the hour. He followed the street at his left, the one that led to Bennett's home. A little later the door opened and Bennett took the same path at a slower gait.

A head projected itself cautiously above the adobe wall that fenced the Baca garden, looked forth swiftly, and vanished. After a few seconds the head appeared again, farther away, where a lilac overhung the wall. Screened by this background the head, with the body appertaining thereunto, heaved, scrambling over the wall, and followed, with infinite caution, the way of the two transgressors, keeping at a discreet distance behind the slower one.

It was quite dark, though a few pale stars glimmered through rushing clouds; the rain was a mere drizzle. Head and appurtenant body—the latter slickered and bulky—paused to listen. They heard plainly the plup of Bennett's feet before them, and sat resolutely down on the sloppy stone walk. There was a swift unlacing of shoes, a knotting of laces. Slinging the shoes about the neck between them, they took up the pursuit, swift and noiseless, slinking in the deeper shadows, darting across the open spaces, and ever creeping closer and closer—a blacker darkness against the dark.

When Bennett had passed through Baca's door, framed for an instant, black against a glowing square of light, Beck had been watching from far down the street. Assured that Bennett was coming, he then walked on swiftly for two or three blocks.

Where a long row of cottonwoods made dark the way, he waited in the shadows. He heard the slow steps of his approaching victim, noted their feebleness, and waited impatiently until Bennett passed his tree.

The gambler pounced on him; he crushed his puffy hand over Bennett's mouth.

"It's me, Beck! If you make a sound, damn you, I'll kill you! Feel that gun at the back of your neck?" He took his hand away. "What's the matter with you? You old fool, can't you stand up? I won't hurt you—unless you try to talk. If you say just one word to me I'm going to kill you. I mean it!" His speech was low and guarded. "I've heard enough talk to-night to do me quite some time. That Scanlon and Baca—I'll show them how to ride me!"

He peered up and down the deserted street.

"Walk on, now! Here; take my arm,

you poor old fool! Let's go down and inspect your bank!"

Bennett gave a heart-rending groan; his knees sagged, and he clung limply to his captor's arm.

"If it will make you feel any better," said Beck with a little note of comfort in his voice, "I'm going to rob my own safe next."

This assurance did not have the desired effect. With many exhortations, slowly, painfully, they negotiated the distance to the Bennett headquarters in the old Almandares Block.

With a strong hand on his collar and the muzzle of a forty-four pressed between his shoulder blades, the unfortunate banker unlocked the door, threaded the long, crowded aisles in the pitch dark, and came at last to his private office. At his captor's command he lighted a single gas jet near the safe; it made a wan and spectral light

in the doleful place; in the corners of the great room the shadows crowded and trampled.

With his shriveled face contorted in dumb protest, with tears on his ash-pale cheeks, the wretched man groped at the combination. Strange thoughts must have passed through his mind as he knelt there, delaying desperately, hoping for the impossible.

Vainly, with a fiendish face, Beck urged and threatened; still the shaking fingers fumbled, without result. With a horrible snarl the gambler clasped Bennett's wrist, twisted it up and back to the shoulder blades, and pushed it violently forward. Stifling a shriek, the tortured wretch pitched over on his face and lay there groveling, gasping, his free hand clawing at the boards of the floor.

The gambler raised him up, releasing the pressure on the twisted arm; Bennett twirled the knobs, the tumblers clicked, the bolts

snicked from their sockets; the great door swung open.

"Now the little doors and the drawers!" Beck directed. He was sweating freely. For a moment it had seemed that Bennett would defy him at the last. "Don't leave anything locked on me! Man, the sweat's just pouring from you. That looks like a lot of money, to me. There, I forgot one thing! I saw one of those little electric flashlights in your show window yesterday. I want it. Lead me to it."

After some delay in the dark the flashlight was found. By its aid the robber compelled his victim to search out and carry a neat traveling bag, certain coiled ropes, two silk handkerchiefs, and a round from a loose stool; and drove him back to the office.

Here, heedless of voiceless protest and despairing tears, he gagged the master of the counting house with the silk handker-

chiefs and the chair round, and then, with scientific precision, proceeded to bind him hand and foot.

"There!" he said, after a final painstaking inspection. "That'll hold you a while! It's a pity you're a bachelor. If you had a family they might find you here to-morrow. As it is I'm afraid you'll have to wait till Monday morning. If you'll excuse me I'll turn out the gas now. Somebody might see it. I can do my packing by the searchlight."

He sized up the stacks of gold, thumbed the bills, made a rough calculation, rolled on the prisoner an eye dark with suspicion, and remarked with great fervor, that he would be damned—Oh! Oh! He packed the money neatly in the bag. Then he turned the flashlight on Bennett's livid face—a hopeless face, seared with greed and fear and all the unlovely passions.

"Bennett, you're the most contemptible

liar God ever let live!" His voice rang deep with scorn. "All that talk about your bein' broke—and here's thirty-one thousand and some dollars—not counting the chicken feed, which I leave for you. Say, do you know what I think?" He held the flashlight closer to the quivering face. "I think you've reached the end of your rope. I think you're about ready for a smash-up. By jingo, that's it! You've been speculating deep or you never would have stolen Drake's deposit.

"It's my notion that you intended to take this little wad and skip for Old Mex—maybe selling them El Paso securities before we missed you. I beat you to it, old hand! You can settle with my lovely companions on Monday. I reckon they'll be pretty sore, too, after all that big talk they made—Scanlon especially. We have about twenty-six

thousand in our safe and I'm taking that. Well, I gotta go. S'long!"

But he came back at once. Bennett could not see his face; but the man's voice, for the first time since the hold-up, carried a human note.

"I kind of hate it, too—you layin' here tied up this way all that time. It's going to be pretty tough. You'll have to overlook it, old man. There wasn't any other way. It was that or kill you. If it'll make you any easier in your mind you've got my dyin' oath that I'd 'a' killed you in a holy minute if you hadn't come through, or if you'd 'a' made one wrong move. Bein' tied up is a lot better than being dead." A new thought struck him. "I've got it!" he cried triumphantly. "Quick as I get to Juarez I'll wire somebody to let you go. That won't be so bad. I won't waste a minute. Buck up! I'm gone now."

Once in the open Beck trod with a jubilant step. It was darker now and raining steadily; the smell of dawn was in the air; he quickened his pace. No sign of life was on the street.

The gambler came to his place of business, took out his key ring, and entered noiselessly. He worked swiftly. A through freight went south before daylight, stopping at Saragossa for water; he would have time to make it nicely. Very quickly the money in the safe was stowed in his traveling bag. There was a little silver in stacks. Though the bag was quite heavy enough already—for much of the money had been gold pieces—Beck took the silver too.

Then a better thought came to him. He counted out nine silver dollars and put them back in the safe; he laid a blank check, face down, on the floor of the safe, with a dollar on each end like paper weights. And in the

slender lance of light cast by the electric flash he penciled a brief note:

Dear Scanlon: I am leaving you nine dollars to send me a postcard.

He snapped out the flashlight, stuck it in his pocket, and tiptoed to the front door, laughing softly.

Man is the slave of habit. Outside Beck turned to lock the door—a most illogical thing to do. He placed the bag between his feet, fumbled for the keyhole and inserted the key. Then he stiffened. He felt the cold muzzle of a gun against his temple, and a gentle voice said:

“Let me carry your bag.”

Frozen with horror, the gambler felt a hand remove his own gun and the flashlight.

“What’s this?” demanded the voice.
“Oh, I see—a searchlight! That’ll be nice. Keep your hands right where they are!”

The hand felt for further weapons. "All right!" said the voice. "Now open up and we'll go upstairs. You tote the baggage. Close the door gently, please. March!"

There was nothing else to do; so Beck marched.

"I may not do as good a job on you as you did with Bennett," said the voice apologetically; "but I'll fix you up some way. While you was tyin' Bennett up I raided the whole darn neighborhood for clothesline. This'll be one awful grouchy town on wash-day!"

Beck's scalp prickled with an agonizing memory of Bennett's ghastly face, as he had seen it last; the hair began to rise. He stopped on the stairs rebelliously.

"I wish you would yell once, or balk—or something," said the voice hopefully. "It'd save me a heap o' trouble—trussing you up. G'wan, now!"

The gambler g'waned.

Chapter IX

THE sky was washed clean; the sound of church bells floated across the sunny meadows; the winds were still, save as a light and loitering air wandered by, poignant with a spicy tang, the sweet alloy of earth.

Listening to those peaceful bells, Mr. Drake and Mr. Jones lolled at ease in the modest hostelry favored by the latter gentleman, and looked out on a freshened and sparkling world. As the last echo died away Mr. Drake resumed the conversation:

"I gotta hand it to you, Mr. Weisenheimer. That's a great bean of yours! You've made your case. Uncle had money; it's gone; somebody's got it; *x* is eager to give too much for my brand; *y* offers an ex-

orbitant price for my scalp; z is willing to pay you to keep quiet. How long will it take two men to dig two graves if the age of the first man is twice that of the second one? And who should have the custody of the child? Perfectly simple!"

"But you can't explain it any other way."

"Hang it! I don't want to explain it any other way. You're right—but you can't go ahead. Your wind-up is good; but can you put it over? How do you propose to go ahead about collecting? It reminds me of a little passage in Shakespeare that my chum sprung on the Frosh class in English. I remember it because Kitty, the prof, was so justly indignant:

"Deep and dangerous,

As full of peril and adventurous spirit

As to o'erwalk a current roaring loud

On the unsteadfast footing of a spear;

If he fall in—good night!"

"It is widely believed," replied Neighbor, "that you cannot catch a weasel asleep; but I think it can be done, with patience. Don't be in such a hurry—be calm!"

"I want you to know I can be as calm as anybody when there's anything to be calm about," retorted Ducky with some acerbity. "It isn't so much the money—not but what I could use that to buy food with—but those fellows are not doing me right."

"There's our one best chance," said Neighbor, more seriously than was his wont. "They're doing wrong. Doing right is as easy as sticking a needle in the eye of a camel; but to do wrong takes a steady, dead lift. Every tendency and every fact pulls against it like the force of gravity at four P. M. I'm not particularly bitter against my own dear little sins, but I do believe that, in the long run, the way of the transgressor is really hard."

There came a tap at the door; Mr. Jones was wanted at the phone.

"Hello! This is Baca!" the telephone said; and could Mr. Jones step up to the house? It thought that matters might be arranged. "*Inmediatamente!*" said Mr. Jones, and hung up.

"Now, Ducky," he counseled, as they walked uptown, "you notice close, and I'll show you some diplomacy. I'll make Baca commit himself so deep that it will amount to a full confession. You still don't quite believe what you think. When I am done with him you'll have no doubts. That's your great trouble, son—you don't think hard enough. You don't concentrate. You will not give to the matter in hand the full impact of your mind. You think straight enough but you haven't got the punch."

Baca lifted a sarcastic eyebrow at Ducky's

presence and bent a questioning look on Neighbor Jones, but showed them into the curtained room of the previous night's conference. Refreshments were offered and declined.

"Well, Mr. Jones, if you are still of the same mind to-morrow morning at ten o'clock your mortgage will be released to you on the terms you mentioned."

Neighbor wore a shamefaced look. He twiddled with his hat.

"Maybe I didn't do just right about that, Mr. Baca. I only wanted to draw you." He looked up and smiled. "You see, we knew all the time that you fellows had Drake's money," he said chattily. "My proposition was to make you tip your hand—to convince Mr. Ducky that my reasoning was strictly O. K., if not logical."

Mr. Baca received this rather staggering communication point-blank but, aside from a heightened color, bore up under it with

surprising spirit. Indeed, he seemed less disconcerted than Ducky Drake.

"Ah!" said the lawyer. "You don't lose much time in getting to the point, do you? Your candor is most commendable, and it shall be my endeavor to observe a like frankness with you. It is better so. Deceit and subterfuge are foreign to my disposition. Though not anticipating this particular turn of affairs, I have been forewarned against you, Mr. Jones, and have made my preparations accordingly. Felipe!"

One of the portières slid aside, revealing a slim brown young man with a heavy revolver, and a fat brown young man with a rifle. At the other door the curtains parted for a glimpse of an older Mexican with a benign and philosophical face and a long white beard. His armament consisted of one double-barreled shotgun. All these men wore appreciative grins, and all these weap-

ons were accurately disposed to rake Mr. Jones amidships.

"My executive staff!" announced the lawyer urbanely.

Neighbor nodded to the staff. Fascinated Ducky did the same.

"So pleased!" he murmured.

Baca paused for a moment to enjoy his triumph. Then he waved his hand.

"That will do." The portières slid together.

"I'm not scared," explained Neighbor Jones earnestly. "That noise you hear is only my teeth chattering!"

"Oh, you punch!" Ducky drew a long breath. "If I had three wishes I'd want to be a puzzle picture—find Ducky Drake!" Then he giggled. "'Gee! Sumpin' must 'a' happened to Ole!' " he suggested lightly.

"Did you ever hear of the old Texan's advice to his boy?" asked Baca. "'My son,

don't steal cattle; but if you do steal cattle, never give 'em up'! It is an admirable maxim, and one which, in part, has been my guide."

"In part? Mr. Evers said in part: 'My dear Mister Umpire—my very dear sir—is it not possible that you erred in your decision?' " murmured Ducky with an air of reminiscent abstraction.

"Drake!" said the lawyer, "whatever else you may have to complain of at my hands, you owe me your life—once and twice."

"Am I to be both your prisoner and your judge?" asked Ducky. "What inference am I to draw?"

Baca snapped his fingers.

"My dear young friend, I do not care that for your inference! Be well guided. Leave Saragossa to-day and never come back. The money for your cattle will be forthcoming when you send a deed; get

some lawyer or a bank to attend to the details of exchange."

"Oh! By the way, how about that mortgage of mine?" inquired Neighbor.

"Pray accept my apologies, Mr. Jones. I charged you with insolence: you are merely impudent. You grow wearisome. Your caliber is about twenty-two short, Jones!" said Baca, tapping a monitory finger with a pencil. "I am no man to get gay with. When you measured your brains against mine you flattered yourself considerably. I am not to be bluffed. I am not to be forced. Judge for yourself what chance you have of outwitting me. And, as for the courts—'Fo' de land's sake, Br'er Fox, whatever you does—don't t'row me in de brieh bush!"

Neighbor blinked mildly.

"Oh, well! When two men play at one game one of 'em has to lose!" he said philosophically. "Never mind about the mort-

gage. I've got no family anyway; so where's the diff? You win!"

"I win!" repeated the other. "And now you will pay forfeit. Day before yesterday, Mr. Jones, you drove a young man out of town. You made him leave his suit case——"

"Oh, pshaw! I forgot that suit case. I must get it."

"You will not! And you took his gun. That was an arbitrary act, Mr. Jones; and now you are to receive fitting punishment for it. The northbound accommodation leaves here at eleven-forty. You will board that train, accompanied by Mr. Drake and escorted by myself. You will never come back."

"I hate to interrupt when you're going so good; but it'll be better for all hands if I declare myself now. You might propose something I shouldn't want to do," said

Neighbor Jones. "I'm holding no grudge against you for outwitting me, and I'm willing you should crow a little; but don't rub it in. I'm not the kind to be evened with a tinhorn gambler. So I take that suitcase with me. I value it highly. It is a keepsake."

"Pardon me; but I really do not see where you are in any position to dictate terms."

"It is a remarkable fact," said Neighbor Jones with great composure, "that, in spite of all the brag about the Southwest as a health resort, the death rate here is precisely the same as that of the crowded East Side of the city of New York—namely, one per capita. Such being the case, since I can die but once and must die that once—I should worry!—as we say in dear old Harvard. Therefore, though you may do all the dictating, I will make bold to mention

the only terms that will be acceptable or accepted. I have no fancy for humble pie—my digestion ain't good."

"There is a certain force to your contention, certainly," conceded Baca, bending an attentive regard on his opponent. "You put it in a new light. Come, I must revise my former estimate of you, I see. And then?"

"Then, this!"—Neighbor checked off the counts with the thumb and fingers of his left hand—"I am perfectly willing to leave town and I never expect to come back—but I won't promise not to come back. Dicky can have his trunk packed and sent after him—leastly because he wouldn't have time to pack, and lastly because there was no question of a threat about his baggage. Me, I'll take my duds."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. And I'll keep my gun. It's become a habit with me—that gun."

"We shall have to insist on the gun, I'm afraid."

"Baca," said Neighbor severely, "do you want me to nonplus you?"

"Why, no," said Baca after consideration; "I don't."

"Be a little ware, then. Don't bank too much on your militia. Any insurance company would rate you as a bad risk if they suspected you of any designs on my gun."

"Jones," said Baca, "you please me. Have it your own way. By all means march out with the honors of war, side arms and flags flying. Only you needn't march—I'll take you down in the machine."

Jones rose and looked at the clock.

"Well, let's go, then. . . . One thing more: You send the money for the cattle on to Albuquerque to-morrow, and we will both pass our words that we'll never, after this day and hour, try to recover the Drake

money from you or make any claim to it. Yes, we will, Ducky. Do as I say and save your cow money. You can't collect a cent from Bennett and Baca, and there's no use in trying. . . . All right—he'll promise if you will, Baca."

"It's a go!" said Baca.

"Shake, then!"

A big touring car purred at the door. At Baca's invitation Ducky drove, with Jones beside him; while the bearded philosopher sat with Baca in the tonneau. During the exchange of views in the house the excitement had kept Drake's spirits up, but he cooled down now, and showed some natural depression, realizing the extent and hopelessness of his loss. But Jones was in no way abashed.

"I see the smoke. You'll have to hurry, if you want that suit case," said Baca as they drew up at Neighbor's hotel.

"Oh, no—got her all packed; it won't take but a minute. Come along, if you're afraid I'll give you the slip."

"I'm not," said Baca. "What good would it do you?"

"I guess that's right," grinned Jones. "I've done my worst now." He hurried in, thrust a bill into the hotelkeeper's hand and grabbed up the suit case, now his own, which had once belonged to the Kansas City Kid. The car trundled them to the station just in time to buy tickets.

"Well, good-by, Baca! Oh, say! Here's a V I borrowed from Beck. Wish you'd give it to him as you go back uptown, and tell him I'm much obliged. Give him my best. He sleeps up over the joint, you know."

"All right; I'll hand it to him. Hi! You're forgetting your suit case."

"Oh, yes! Well, here she comes. So long!"

"Glad to have met you. So long!"

There were no other passengers. The little jerkwater train halted for a bare moment to let them on and then chugged stolidly on her way. They stood on the platform of the rear car; the greenwood closed in beside the right of way, so that the last Ducky saw of Saragossa was the receding triangle made by the station, the old Almandares Warehouse, and a black doll waving from a toy car. Ducky sighed.

"No hard feelings, kid?"

"Of course not," said Ducky stoutly. "You're not to blame. Besides, I don't believe we should ever have recovered that money. That crowd got it, all right—I know that anyway. I knew it before, but I didn't know that I knew it—wasn't sure;

not sure enough, for instance, to sanction an attempt to take it by force."

"Yes," assented Neighbor musingly. "I thought of that. That's why I took you up to Baca's place with me. I sure wasn't expectin' an ambush, though. Pretty smart fellow, Baca!"

"Yes; and if we had tried force we might jolly well have been killed," said Drake brightening.

"Maybe it's all turned out for the best, Ducky. Well, let's go in."

"That's a heavy bag you have there," said Ducky, lifting it.

"Yes," said Neighbor carelessly. "A good share of it was gold."

"A good share—*huh?* Whadda you mean—gold?"

"Why, your uncle's estate. It's in there, under my clothes. Beck had it in a new bag, but I put it in mine when I counted it."

"What!"

"Don't say what—say sir! Beck, he stole it from his pals last night. They ain't found it out yet; but Tavy will be untyin' Beck about now."

"What?"

Ducky was on his knees, struggling with the snaps of the suit case.

"Don't spill any of it, Ducky. Yes; I gagged Beck and hogtied him up in his own poker room. Some job—believe me! I put four aces in his vest pocket."

THE END



